

A passionate drama of love and innocence
betrayed as Napoleon's armies sweep across Europe

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In the Path of Eagles

Elizabeth Mayhew



The veiled Parisian fortune-teller examined Sophie's palm, tracing out the lines with one skinny finger like a hawk's claw. At last she spoke to twelve-year-old Sophie:

"I see a tall, fair stranger, very rich and powerful, who takes you and someone near to you far away. You will live in great splendour for a while, but then there is a time of great danger to someone you love. You will make a long journey to a land where it snows and the winters are long and dark and here you will be very unhappy. But there is great happiness coming to you from an unexpected quarter, someone from your own land, a soldier, who will protect and cherish you. You must beware of another man who tries to destroy this happiness. . . ."

IN THE PATH OF EAGLES

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Elizabeth Mayhew

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"VISITORS FOR the Citoyenne Monteval," said the slovenly unshaven guard to a gross man in a red Phrygian cap, sitting with his feet up on a table, his shirt undone to his waist, and tossing his bunch of heavy keys idly from one hand to the other.

"Where's your authority, Citoyenne?" Tante Amelie let go of Sophie's hand to produce a tattered document, impressively stamped and sealed. The gross man took it and examined it carefully. "All in order, Citoyenne," he said regretfully, levering himself up from his chair and jangling his keys menacingly. He patted Sophie's head with one filthy hand. "That's a nice big cockade you're wearing, ma petite. I'm glad to see you're a good republican."

Tante Amelie gave Sophie's hand a warning pressure and she smiled timidly at the man, who was fitting a key into the iron door and swinging it open to let them pass through before clanging it shut behind them. They found themselves in a long dark corridor and were nearly overpowered by the stench of musty dampness, stale food and defective sewerage.

"My poor Marie," exclaimed Tante Amelie, "how is she existing amongst these smells." She took out two handkerchiefs, saturated with toilet water, gave one to Sophie and held the other to her nose. They picked their way carefully past water buckets and slop pails set in untidy piles outside the open cell doors. These were so dimly lighted by the tiny iron-barred windows set high up on the wall that they could only just distinguish the

shapes of truckle beds, two to each cell. Further along the corridor there was a buzz of cheerful talk and they found a group of men setting out bowls, knives and forks on a long wooden table. They paused to bow politely to Tante Amelie, with an exaggerated punctilio in strange contrast to the rough and ready greetings common to all outside these walls, the invariable tutoyement and standard 'Citoyen' and 'Citoyenne'.

"May we help you, Madame?" one of them asked.

"I am looking for my sister, Citoyenne Monteval," said Tante Amelie.

"On the next landing, Madame. Allow me to escort you there." He led them up a flight of shallow stone steps, the walls scarred and stained with deep cuts and smears of what might have been blood. This corridor was crowded, too, and there was the same dank oppressive smell made worse by the humidity of the day. But there was an animated sound of conversation, and even laughter, among the men and women promenading up and down.

"There's Mama," said Sophie excitedly to Tante Amelie and Marie-Françoise caught sight of them at the same moment and ran towards them.

"Sophie, my pet—Amelie. Oh, I'm so relieved to see you. How have you been getting on?" She hugged and kissed them both repeatedly. In spite of her dismal surroundings Marie-Françoise was as beautifully dressed as ever, her hair carefully arranged and a faint delicious fragrance surrounding her least movement. Sophie, overcome with joy at seeing her mother again, held tightly on to her skirt and inhaled her remembered scent thankfully. Tante Amelie and Marie-Françoise were talking in low voices over her head. "Edouard was sent to the Conciergerie seven days ago and you know what that means, there's very little hope now, I'm afraid."

"Did you see him before he went?"

"Only briefly. I have had a letter from him since, regretting our estrangement and commanding me to em-

brace Sophie on his behalf. How have you been managing, *ma chère*?"

"Leon has been to see Tallien, who has promised to see what he can do, but this new Law of Prairial gives no one any safety. I have kept Sophie close to me all the time. I don't dare let her out of my sight for a moment. We are fortunate to be living in the country and to know the Mayor so well. Coming to Paris today was frightening, I shook like a leaf at the barrier, but fortunately the men there were very taken with Sophie and her large cockade and she made friends with them quickly. Leon is meeting us later this afternoon and conducting us back home, so we shall be reasonably safe. How much danger is there that you will be removed to the Conciergerie, too, *ma chérie*?"

"I have let it be known that I am pregnant so I hope all will be well. I may get away with it, others have been known to do so. But you will look after my dear Sophie should anything happen?" Tears came into Marie-Françoise's eyes as she looked down at her little daughter, her great dark eyes turned trustfully up towards her mother, whom she had not seen since her abrupt denunciation and arrest on a visit to Paris a month ago. "With Edouard's life in the balance I can't bear to think of her becoming an orphan so young. How are you managing?"

"We exist," sighed Amelie. "With our own vegetables and chickens we are able to barter for what we need. I have brought you some eggs and butter today, as well as clean linen."

"They will save our lives, *ma chère*. You must come and meet some of my good friends. We all share and share alike here. We are all good republicans and certainly believe in equality." Marie-Françoise introduced her sister and daughter to a varied collection of acquaintances, some real aristocrats of the 'ancien regime', others who had served the new Republic faithfully and had then been thrown into prison by the denunciations of jealous rivals. They made a big fuss of Sophie, and Amelie was astonished by their good humour and light-

heartedness when they were all in the anteroom for the guillotine. She looked anxiously at Marie-Françoise; under her carefully brushed chestnut hair her face was almost haggard and there were dark circles about her bright blue eyes. Even if she had been separated from Edouard, her husband, for two years now, Amelie knew that she still cherished the memory of the handsome former Vicomte who had treated her with such neglect and flaunted his many love affairs so shamelessly during their ten years together. She obviously could not view his imminent death with the detachment she pretended. Had not her own arrest been due to her attempts to free Edouard, arrested when trying to flee with General Dumouriez to Coblenze in 1793, attempts which Amelie knew Edouard would have sneered at cruelly, saying "Madame de Monteval thinks that one glance from those big eyes of hers will get her anything she wants." Amelie shuddered at the danger which still surrounded her sister, a danger which might extend to herself, her husband, Leon, and even seven-year-old Sophie soon. Already this summer the prisons of Paris were congested with eight thousand suspects and every day forty or sixty victims fell under the guillotine's knife. Had they survived all the turmoil of these last years, the excitement in the beginning of a new era of liberty dawning, the loss of the rents from their father's small estate and his pension from the King, the execution of the King and Queen, the foreign wars, the constant struggle for food, last year's Reign of Terror, only to succumb to this latest insensate massacre unleashed by Robespierre? What good now were their declarations of allegiance to the new republic, their outward conformance to fresh rules and regulations, their careful husbandry of the small walled garden which surrounded the house they had bought on the outskirts of Paris? They had long ago discovered that the will to live was stronger than former loyalties and how much one was willing to compromise, to lie even, to stay alive.

Tante Amelie and Sophie stayed most of the afternoon

in the dreary prison, once a convent for Carmelite nuns. But at five they had to go if they were to join Amelie's husband, who was to escort them home. Sophie, who had been sitting on her mother's lap chattering eagerly after her initial shyness had been overcome, looked up at her aunt with misgivings, then turned to her mother. "Can't I stay here with you, Mama?"

"No, my pet, you wouldn't like it here. Only think, our cells are so damp we have to wring the water out of our clothes every morning. You be a good girl and go back home with Tante Amelie."

"But, Mama," said Sophie, her big eyes starting to overflow with tears, "I haven't seen you for such a long time."

"I know, my pet, but you must be brave. Mama is shut up here for the time being and you don't want to be a prisoner, too, do you?"

"I don't mind if I can be with you."

Marie-Françoise embraced Sophie tightly, her tears mingling with her daughter's, then stood up abruptly and kissed her sister farewell. "Take care of her," she said unsteadily.

Tante Amelie hurried Sophie away, now sobbing loudly, and when they stopped at the head of the stairs to look back, Marie-Françoise waved her lace-trimmed handkerchief at them bravely.

Sophie was still crying when they reached the great iron gate and Tante Amelie banged on it to attract the guard's attention. The same gross man swung it open, eddies of garlic and rank sweat emanating from him as he bent solicitously over Sophie. "Come, ma petite, why are you crying so bitterly?"

"I want to stay with my Mama," wept Sophie and Tante Amelie, nervous of attracting unwelcome attention, tugged at her hand.

"Just a minute, Citoyenne," said the gross man, giving a sidelong look at Tante Amelie, "there's no hurry. We can't have this little one leaving here in tears, it might give us a bad name." He picked up Sophie and wiped

her eyes tenderly with a grimy rag brought from his pocket, then from another pocket took a sweetmeat and put it in her hand. "Vive la Republique, eh, ma petite?" And Sophie obediently echoed "Vive la Republique," with a watery smile at the man.

Deputy Leon Charles Phillippe Garat was waiting for them at a table in a nearby crowded café, completely hidden behind his newspaper. He put it down slowly when they appeared and stood up. He was an unremarkable man, one whom if one were pressed for a description one would find it difficult to bring to mind any distinguishing feature. His very ordinariness had brought him safely through many vicissitudes. The younger son of a good family of no fortune, he had come to Paris in 1780 to train as a lawyer, had become a mild Jacobin and subsequently been elected to the Convention to represent his family's district. By attracting no attention, by his quiet capacity for drawing up legislation, he had survived where others more brilliant had gone under. He had married Amelie twelve years ago and they had a good-natured, comfortable relationship which suited them both very well. When Marie-Françoise, who was younger than Amelie, had been persuaded to separate from her Edouard, it was Leon who had drawn up the agreement and who had then given his sister-in-law and niece sanctuary under his modest roof. During the Convention sittings he had a small room in Paris, but he spent as much time as possible in the country. As he and Amelie had no living children they were both devoted to Sophie.

He spoke gently to Sophie now. "Why, my precious, your face is filthy. Here, let me wipe it and then you shall have an ice." While he was dealing with Sophie, he tapped the paper on the table with a significant forefinger and indicated to his wife that there was momentous news. Amelie rustled it open and searched the columns. There, tucked away in a corner was a list of the day's executions, Edouard de Monteval's name among them. Amelie sat down heavily and dabbed at her eyes

quickly. "My poor Marie, she will be very unhappy. If anything should happen to her now, Sophie—"

"Sh," said her husband. "Will you have an ice, too, my dear? Look, Sophie, what I found for you in a shop this afternoon." And while Sophie was playing delightedly with the small musical box she had unwrapped, Leon said to his wife in an undertone, "I had a word with Barras this morning. He doesn't hold out much hope. Marie-Françoise was very imprudent and did not destroy some important letters. They will go against her, I am afraid, should she come to trial. In any event, these so-called trials are a travesty of justice."

"Will you let Marie know?"

"If you think she can bear it. But bad news travels fast and someone is sure to bring a paper into the prison."

"She said she was pretending to be pregnant, will that save her, do you think?"

He spread out his hands hopelessly. "Who knows? I doubt it. The Public Prosecutor will send her to hospital for examination."

The next seven days were oppressively hot and Amelie woke each morning filled with forebodings which deepened into a headache as the day wore on. Leon had gone back to Paris, but had promised to send word if Marie-Françoise was moved to the Conciergerie. Amelie did her best to go about her household tasks cheerfully and to smile when Sophie came running in from the garden where she had been playing with the mayor's little daughter, but she found herself starting anxiously at each knock on the door.

July 28 brought threatening storm clouds which built up in great thunderheads over distant Paris. For some reason Sophie could not settle to sleep that evening, she kept complaining she was hot and thirsty, until the placid Amelie completely lost her temper, which she regretted immediately when Sophie burst into tears, lamenting, "I want Mama, you're being horrid."

Just as she was comforting her, there was a great stir outside in the street, the banging of the garden gate, and

she heard Leon's voice calling. As it was then after midnight, she soothed Sophie quickly and with shaking legs went out on to the landing to look over the banisters into the hall below. "Leon, what's happened? What brings you home at this hour? Nothing has happened to Marie, has it?"

But Leon, shaken out of his usual calm, was bounding up the stairs to take her in his arms. "Amelie, my dear, Robespierre is dead, guillotined this afternoon with his brother, St. Just and Couthon."

"Oh, thank God!" cried Amelie, her body weak with relief.

They went downstairs, arms round each other, to forage in the kitchen for Leon had not eaten all day. Between mouthfuls he told her of the exciting seventy-two hours which had just passed. Robespierre had mounted the tribune of the Convention two days before to speak of a new purge. When the deputies had demanded names, he had refused to reply. Thrown into panic the deputies had dispersed to argue and plot all night long. When the Convention met next morning St. Just, appointed by Robespierre to name the traitors, started to speak but was continually interrupted. The uproar was tremendous, no fewer than three men were clinging to the tribune and trying to address the assembly. There were cries of "Down with the tyrant," when Robespierre stood up. Then one brave deputy demanded a decree of accusation against Robespierre. This, for a moment, silenced the Convention and nothing was heard but heavy breathing. Finally scattered applause broke out, the proposal was accepted and voted on by a show of hands. At four o'clock gendarmes entered the hall and arrested Robespierre, St. Just and Couthon. Remembering this moment Leon paused to savour it. "And then, my dear, what do you think we did?"

Amelie shook her head. "We debated the drying and burning of seaweed on islands near Quimperlé." He burst out laughing and Amelie joined him.

"But later reports arrived that the troops of the Com-

mune were advancing on us. I tell you, we began to lose courage then. For some reason, however, they retreated again and we quickly voted the Robespierrists outlaws and put Barras in charge of public order."

"Barras, so there is hope for Marie now?"

Leon nodded quickly and continued his story. "For the second night running we got no sleep. Rumours succeeded each other with great rapidity. At five in the morning we heard that Robespierre and the others had been taken to the Tuileries. We only left the Convention at ten this morning and made straight to a café for some black coffee. Ma foi! our heads were reeling by then, some of us laid them down on the tables and went fast asleep. Some time in the afternoon the outlaws were taken to the Revolutionary Tribunal and sentenced to death. By six all was over. The news spread round the boulevards and there was general rejoicing. I decided to come straight out here and tell you the good news. The prison doors should open now. As soon as I have had some sleep in my own comfortable bed I will go back to Paris and see what I can do for Marie."

"Uncle Leon," said a small voice and there was Sophie standing in her nightgown, a forlorn little figure with her great dark eyes and tousled short curls. "My door was open and you were talking so loudly I couldn't get to sleep." She spoke quickly to forestall Tante Amelie's complaints. But to her astonishment they held out their arms to her and she came forward slowly to settle herself on Leon's lap.

"I think, my precious, that Mama will soon be home with you now."

MARIE-FRANÇOISE was dressing to go out, watched curiously by her wide-eyed daughter who was home from school for a few days. This dressing was a protracted ritual, yet at the end Marie-Françoise appeared to be wearing less than when she started. Under her fragile embroidered muslin dress with its short sleeves and deep décolletage she wore only a white lawn underskirt. On her feet were white silk stockings and flimsy ribbon-tied sandals, while each toe was ornamented with rings. Her hair was cut short and dressed in curls bound back by a ribbon and from her ears dangled gold slave earrings. Her maid, Lucie, was carefully folding the fine cashmere shawl which was her sole protection against the chill night air.

"Where are you going tonight, Maman?" asked Sophie.

"To a reception at Mme. Bonaparte's in the Rue de la Victoire, chérie."

"Mme. Bonaparte is not nearly as pretty as you, Maman, she does not dare to show her teeth when she smiles."

"What a compliment, my pet. She is very charming, nevertheless, and now she is married to General Bonaparte, has great influence in society."

"How did you first get to know her?"

"We were imprisoned together in the Carmelite Prison. Mme. de Beauharnais, as she was then, spent all her time weeping as I remember. Her husband was guillotined at more or less the same time as your father. Poor Edouard!" Marie-Françoise gazed at her reflection in the

mirror complacently. Edouard was long dead, but she was very much alive, she reflected. When she had first been released from prison she had returned thankfully to her sister's country house. But having expected death under the knife daily, her appetite for life had increased inordinately, she found the country life tedious and dull, and she had flung herself increasingly and with enormous zest into the social pleasures of the Directory. Soon her beauty and gaiety had won her many admirers and dressed in the floating muslins and gauzes which concealed none of the pleasing curves of her supple body, she became part of the set which congregated round Barras, the most influential and most corrupt of the five Directors. However, even the delicate finery which weighed no more than a few ounces, cost plenty of paper assignats and she was soon heavily in debt. To her sister's dismay she had become the mistress of Gaston Laroche, one of the many speculators who, profiting by France's desperate need for equipment for her expanding citizen armies, had made a fortune overnight. Amelie was more upset at the thought of her placing herself under the protection of such a parvenu, from who knows where, of no family, than the fact that she had a lover. M. Laroche had established her in a small house in the centre of Paris and paid for Sophie to go to the fashionable Institution Nationale de St. Germain-en-Laye. With her 'ancien regime' manners, quick wit and instinctive charm, instilled in her by convent schooling, and her former title of Vicomtesse, M. Laroche could pride himself on a mistress who moved easily in the highest Governmental circles and who could, if necessary, beguile a Director into granting a contract. Marie-Françoise on her side could indulge herself to the full with the feminine extravaganzas she saw no reason to resist.

Tante Amelie, disconcerted by the casual immorality of her sister's circle of friends, did her best to counteract the influence of all this on her young niece. But Sophie who, although respecting her uncle and aunt greatly, adored her mother and thought her loveliness unsur-

passed, asked nothing better than to spend a few days in the luxurious little house in the Rue de Lille where, in spite of the shortages everyone in Paris suffered, there was never a lack of anything money could buy. Marie-Françoise accepted her daughter's adoration, as she accepted everything else, with careless amiability. Since her imprisonment she lived only for the moment and never thought ahead. She was genuinely fond of Sophie when she was with her, but she would never have sacrificed any of her pleasures for her daughter's sake and Sophie, half-guessing this, thought more of a loving caress from her mother than all Tante Amelie's unselfish devotion.

Marie-Françoise's indulged little dog, Egalité, nuzzled up against Sophie on the rose satin bedcover and Sophie patted his wet nose and gave him a chocolate from the be-ribboned box lying open beside her. Marie-Françoise peered apprehensively into the mirror and smoothed out a faint wrinkle beside her blue eyes. "Too many late nights," she sighed. "I must get some more complexion cream tomorrow." There was the distant sound of doors banging and soon M. Laroche was being ushered into the room, a large bunch of pink and white carnations almost obscuring his rotund stomach.

"Mon cher Laroche," said Marie-Françoise, giving him one languid hand to kiss, "I am in despair tonight—I am growing old and wrinkled, I must soon retire to the country to conceal myself beneath a widow's veil."

"Nonsense, Madame. You should buy yourself a new mirror, I can discern no wrinkles whatsoever." And he gazed lasciviously down at her full breasts, barely concealed beneath the white muslin, then bent over to implant a kiss on each one.

Marie-Françoise gave a rippling self-satisfied laugh. "Ah! Laroche, you are a convincing flatterer. Tell me, would you retire to the country with me when I have lost my looks?"

"If I retired to the country, my angel, how would I make all the money which you spend with such speed and ease?"

Marie-Françoise pouted prettily. "You're angry because you have just received Leroy's last bill."

"So many assignats for so little! Perhaps I would find it less expensive if you went round naked or spent all day and night lying in bed waiting for my visits."

"You're ungrateful, Gaston mon cher. Who charmed Barras into giving you that last contract?"

"You're right as always, ma chère. Do some more charming tonight then I might consider giving you that diamond necklace you covet so much."

Marie-Françoise was as delighted as a small girl promised a new toy. She caressed M. Laroche's fat cheeks amorously and allowed him to fondle her possessively. Sophie, lying on the bed with Egalité, watched them with a detached interest. She found M. Laroche faintly repulsive. Although he was not actually excessively fat, being merely stocky and well built, his small shrewd eyes and round squashed nose gave him the look of a well-barbered pig. In contrast to his youth when he had run through the streets of Nantes barefoot and muddy, he was now fastidiously clean, changing his linen twice a day and smelling always of expensive toilet water. But nothing could disguise the beads of sweat which came out on his forehead and moistened his hands after a few moments in a crowded room and, very conscious of this idiosyncrasy, he always carried four or more monogrammed linen handkerchiefs in his pocket ready to wipe himself surreptitiously.

"Now, mon cher, allow me to finish dressing or we shall never get to Mme. Bonaparte's."

M. Laroche turned away and casting about for some place to lay his carnations, caught sight of Sophie. "Why, Sophie! Your mother did not tell me you were expected today or I should have brought you some bon-bons from Berthellmot's. How are you, my little pet?"

Sophie, knowing her mother was turning to watch her behaviour, slid off the bed and curtsied politely to M. Laroche. "Monsieur is looking very well, I hope you are in good health, Monsieur?"

M. Laroche, enchanted by this display of old world manners, pulled Sophie to him and sat down in a chair with her on his knee.

"I will take you shopping tomorrow morning, Sophie. Is there anything special you want?"

He expected her to demand trinkets or an assortment of sweetmeats and was astonished when she answered, "Books, please, Monsieur."

Marie-Françoise, who had never opened a book since her school days, laughed at his bewilderment. "Oh yes, Laroche, you did not know that my daughter was a great scholar, did you? She devours books like a voracious worm. She'll turn into one of these famous blue stockings like Mme. de Staël."

"Well, if that's what you really want, my pet, books you shall have. Though mind you don't dim those beautiful dark eyes prematurely."

"I am ready now, mon cher," said Marie-Françoise, standing up to let Lucie place her cashmere shawl round her shoulders. Sophie gazed at her mother with admiration. "Oh, Maman, I wish I could be a little mouse and creep into Mme. Bonaparte's salon with you and M. Laroche this evening."

Marie-Françoise patted her cheek abstractedly. "There won't even be room for a mouse there. Allow your mother a few more years of triumph before you outshine her, ma chérie."

Sophie followed them downstairs to watch M. Laroche helping her mother into the smart little phaeton which he drove at a tremendous pace though the half-empty streets, recklessly splashing the passers-by who were picking their way carefully along, close against the walls where the mud was not so thick. She waved until they were out of sight, then went indoors to settle down contentedly with a book.

Mme. Bonaparte's small house in the Rue de la Victoire was crowded as usual with members of the Government, businessmen and a sprinkling of soldiers, in addition to the professional beauties like Marie-Françoise,

wives of absent generals and the more shabbily and respectably dressed ladies of the Faubourg St. Germain who, after years of seclusion, were being tempted out into society by the agreeable wife of the famous General even now winning fresh victories in Egypt.

Marie-Françoise pressed through the chattering throng, followed by the perspiring M. Laroche, acknowledging the greetings which came from all sides, until she reached her hostess. Josephine Bonaparte was neither very young nor very pretty, but she had such grace of manner, such exquisite movements and such a seductive slurred voice that her success as a hostess was understandable. As soon as she caught sight of Marie-Françoise she moved forward and the two women met and embraced with subdued cries of mutual delight that caused everyone nearby to turn and stare at the charming picture they made together. Ever since their first meeting in the Carmelite Prison the two had remained friends and had provided each other with mutual comfort and support in the very difficult days succeeding their release. Now that Josephine was married to one of the heroes of the Republic and Marie-Françoise was safely under the protection of one of its richest men they still maintained this friendship.

When their conversation was interrupted by fresh arrivals, Marie-Françoise dutifully made her way over to where Talleyrand, the Foreign Minister, was standing surrounded by admiring women. In spite of his hobbling gait and corpse-like pallor his attraction for women was extraordinary and his tally of mistresses reputedly astronomical. Marie-Françoise, who preferred down-to-earth lust to the suave flatteries of this ex-bishop, nevertheless smiled at him sweetly and whispered in his attentive ear the request which M. Laroche had primed her with beforehand. Talleyrand equivocated with bland politeness, more than a match for any woman's wiles, however beautiful, and Marie-Françoise, images of her promised diamond necklace floating tantalisingly before her eyes, intensified her efforts to persuade him. After

quarter of an hour's courteous fencing she gave up, still not quite sure if she had convinced him. She looked round for her protector, saw him deep in conversation with M. Ouvrard, the banker, then hesitated momentarily over which knot of talkers she should join. While she was thus hesitating, she caught sight of a handsome young chasseur who had been regarding her fixedly from the other side of the room for some time. She smiled at him engagingly and beckoned him over. He came through the groups as though he were mounting an attack on an enemy strongpoint, but once in front of her his momentum slowed and he stood over her, blushing and tongue-tied. Marie-Françoise saw that he was very young, in spite of the captain's uniform he was wearing.

"Perhaps we had better introduce ourselves, Monsieur. I am Citoyenne Monteval and you are Citoyen Capitaine—?"

"Bresson," he replied, still blushing and examining her with an infatuated fascination.

Marie-Françoise was used to all degrees of admiration. She let him examine her in contented silence for several minutes, then took his arm. "Come, Monsieur, I am sure you have some interesting tales of battles to tell me. Let us go where we can be more comfortable."

By the time Gaston Laroche had finished his absorbing discussion with M. Ouvrard and looked round for his mistress she was nowhere to be seen. He wiped his hands and forehead and stood on tiptoe to search for her. There was M. Talleyrand but among the women enclosing him in a tight circle there was no Marie-Françoise. Surely she had not forgotten her important mission. Increasingly anxious, M. Laroche tried to force his way through to the smaller salons leading off the main one, but was continually detained by loquacious friends. It was after midnight when he found her, in earnest conversation with their hostess.

"Ah, Laroche," she cried when she saw him, "I've been searching for you this past hour. You must take me

home, mon cher, my head is splitting. I can scarcely stand."

At once M. Laroche was all attention, finding her shawl, saying good-bye to Mme. Bonaparte and thrusting a way for her through the crowds to the front door. All the way home in the phaeton Marie-Françoise drooped beside him, her hand to her head, giving an occasional soft groan. When M. Laroche had handed her down and they had been let into the hall, Marie-Françoise turned to him with a small fragile smile. "You will be glad to know that I spoke to Talleyrand, mon cher. That's what gave me this prostrating headache, I expect. Asking favours of him is difficult, like trying to capture a fluttering bird, but I hope I implanted the right idea in his mind."

M. Laroche seized her in his arms gratefully. "Marie, my love, I am eternally grateful. If all turns out well you shall have your necklace."

Marie-Françoise stood limply in his grasp, so limply that M. Laroche remembered her indisposition. "But I am being a heartless brute, my chère, I had forgotten your poor head. You must go to bed at once and I will leave."

"Ah, Gaston, you are truly thoughtful. I hope to see you sometime tomorrow, mon cher, but not too early." And Marie-Françoise trailed slowly and gracefully up the stairs, turning to blow a kiss to her lover waiting below.

Sophie woke at ten next morning and looked round with pleasure at her small bedroom, which had been re-decorated especially for her. The bedhangings, counterpane and curtains were of delicate embroidered muslin which made everything appear luminous and bright even in the muted sunlight of late November. Sophie wondered if her mother were awake yet. What she most enjoyed on her visits was being allowed to take chocolate at the foot of Marie-Françoise's large bed, with its rose silk drapery falling in graceful folds from a central canopy. Her mother, looking very frail and beautiful in her lace-trimmed lawn nightdress, would sip languidly at her chocolate and give some account to Sophie of her eve-

ning's doings. Sophie wriggled out of bed and, shivering, put on a white quilted silk wrapper that had been cut down from one discarded by her mother. She crept out on the landing and down the stairs to the kitchen, the one warm room in the house at this time of the morning, where Lucie and Anne-Marie were drinking coffee in a respite from their housework.

"Has Mama rung for her chocolate yet?" Sophie asked, nibbling at a biscuit.

The two maids exchanged quick glances. "No, not yet, Mlle. Sophie. Shall we make you some?"

They sat round the table in amiable companionship, letting the minutes slip by in desultory gossip, the two maids with their skirts up to their knees to warm their cold legs, Sophie with her elbows on the table and her hands clasped round the comforting cup of hot chocolate.

Sophie's sharp ears were the first to hear the faint tingling of the bell from her mother's room. She jumped up at once and ran upstairs in high spirits before Lucie could intercept her, and knocked gently on her mother's door. When Marie-Françoise called "Enter" she threw open the door and ran in, only to stop on the threshold in confusion.

"Sophie," cried her mother in a penetrating whisper, "who gave you permission to come in here. You've no business to come in till I send for you. Where is Lucie?"

Sophie gasped at her in surprise and took in a pair of boots, a braided green jacket, some white buckskin breeches and her mother's flimsy evening dress lying in haphazard disarray on the floor and the broad shoulders of a black-haired stranger lying face downwards on the bed.

Marie-Françoise was shrugging herself furiously into her quilted dressing-gown and searching for her slippers. "Go back to your room," she hissed, "at once, do you hear?"

Sophie felt tears come to her eyes. "I only thought I could have chocolate with you as I always do, Maman."

Marie-Françoise relented then. She gave her daughter

a quick hug and kiss. "Not this morning, baby. Come out on the landing a minute." When she had shut the door behind her, she went on. "Now, Sophie, my pet, I want you to do something for me. Get dressed now so that if M. Laroche arrives you can receive him. Tell him I am still prostrated in my bedroom and get him to take you shopping as he promised last night. Just a little lie, my precious, I don't want to upset M. Laroche, you understand?"

When Sophie, wiping her eyes, agreed reluctantly her mother hugged her again. "That's a good girl. Later on, when you come back from shopping, we'll go out together somewhere, shall we?"

"Yes, Maman," Sophie answered.

Marie-Françoise sighed with relief, went back into her room and went over to the bed. She smiled down at the young Captain who was stretching sleepily. "What it is to be young and healthy, mon cher, and to sleep so soundly. If I know young men you are ravenously hungry now."

The young Captain of Chasseurs, no longer bashful, rolled over quickly and pinioned Marie-Françoise with his long arms. She capitulated with a gurgling laugh. "You soldiers are always so passionate."

"Ah, Madame, you smell delicious, like a field of spring flowers, I hope you have no engagements today?"

"None that I can't break."

Meanwhile Sophie was dressing herself quickly and when she was ready she went slowly downstairs to the small salon and stationed herself at the window to watch for M. Laroche's arrival. She thought sadly of these tiresome men who took up so much of her mother's time. If only her mother was middle-aged, fat and dowdy like the mother of her best friend, Stephanie, whose ample lap had room for two little girls at once and who was never too busy to listen to their childish secrets. She stifled these disloyal thoughts quickly—after all, as Tante Amelie had often explained, her mother had been

through a terrible ordeal and had a right to enjoy herself in her own way now.

Here was M. Laroche, his phaeton skidding to a halt at the front door, bounding up the steps and knocking on the door like an impetuous youngster instead of a staid middle-aged businessman. Anne-Marie ushered him into the salon and Sophie came away from the window to drop him a respectful curtsy. M. Laroche pinched her cheek lovingly and handed her a small parcel. "And how is your dear mother today?"

Sophie lowered her eyes and sighed deeply. "Ah, Monsieur, she has had a terrible night. Only now has she fallen into a sleep with the aid of a little opium her maid persuaded her to take. Poor Maman, she suffers tortures when she has a migraine." She was rather pleased with her fabrication and wished her mother could have been there to admire it.

M. Laroche sighed in sympathy. "Your beautiful mother has such a warm, sensitive nature, she does everything with such enthusiasm that she wears herself out. We will leave her to sleep, eh, chérie, and go out to the Palais Royale together."

"Monsieur is too kind, too generous," said Sophie, dropping him another curtsy.

When Sophie returned with M. Laroche at five, laden down with parcels of every description, she expected to find her mother waiting for them in the salon. Her disappointment was great when Anne-Marie told them that her mistress was still confined to her room for she had been longing to tell her mother of all she had seen and done, including a distinctly creepy visit to a fortune teller whose cabinet had been decorated with huge and terrifying black bats, their outspread wings nailed to the ceiling. Sophie had nearly lost her courage when she entered and would have retreated again quickly had not the old woman, mysteriously veiled except for her glittering eyes, pounced on her quickly, seizing her hand tightly and guiding her to a chair. For a long time she had examined Sophie's palm, tracing out the lines with one skinny finger

like a hawk's claw and muttering to herself queerly. Sophie took quick shallow breaths for the air in the room was oppressive and smelt faintly of corruption and she wondered uncomfortably why she had obeyed the sudden impulse to have her fortune told. At length the old woman had begun to speak, tumbling out her words so rapidly that Sophie despaired of remembering them all.

The gist of what she could remember went something like this: 'I see a tall fair stranger, very rich and powerful, who takes you and someone near to you far away. You will live in great splendour for a while, but then there is a time of great danger to someone you love. You will make a long journey to a land where it snows and the winters are long and dark and here you will be very unhappy. But there is great happiness coming to you from an unexpected quarter, someone from your own land, a soldier, who will protect and cherish you. You must beware of another man who tries to destroy this happiness and indeed succeeds for a time, though all will be well in the end.'

It all sounded very much like the half-serious, half-make-believe fortunes with cards that a servant of Tante Amelie used to amuse her with on rainy days—tall fair strangers, sinister dark men, long journeys—and Sophie giggled a little.

"Will I have a great many children?" she asked hastily to cover up her laughter.

The old woman bent up her hand and counted. "I see three, no four children. You have a chequered life before you, *ma petite*. You will travel far and have great vicissitudes."

Her grasp on Sophie slackened and the latter took her hand away thankfully and stood up to go, passing over handfuls of notes which the old woman clutched raptaciously, her eyes narrowing as she spread them out to count them. Sophie ran down the stairs and rejoined M. Laroche, breathing deeply to get the stale smell out of her lungs.

"Well, will you marry a great man with a vast fortune who loves you to distraction, *ma petite*?" he asked, linking his arm through hers and guiding her to a nearby café.

"I'm not sure, Monsieur, I think I am promised to a soldier but her talk was all of fair strangers and dark strangers and strange lands. I am to have four children, though, that I did understand."

"Perhaps you will marry a famous General, like Mme. Bonaparte?" M. Laroche suggested. "An ice, *ma petite*?"

"No one would think to look at him that General Bonaparte was famous," said Sophie when her ice had been ordered. "He came to our school in April to see Hortense, his step-daughter, and his sister Caroline, he's so pale and slight, only his eyes are strange, grey and frightening, as though they saw everything."

"He has grandiose aspirations, that one. I am glad he is out of the country at the moment or he might be tempted to seize power. These soldiers are all alike, always complaining about honest businessmen, such as me, who work hard to make their money, cheating their soldiers out of necessities, when they should look hard at their own commissary departments, who are not above lining their own pockets."

Sophie, who was not interested in M. Laroche's musings on the iniquities of the Army Higher Command, dug her spoon into the delicious ice in front of her, watching, between mouthfuls, the colourful crowds passing continually in front of them. Times might be hard, food scarce and France ringed by enemies, but the Parisians could still enjoy parading up and down the avenues of the Palais Royale, dressed in the height of incredible fashion, admiring the goods in the shop windows and each other.

When M. Laroche heard on their return of Marie-Françoise's continued indisposition he was all for sending for a doctor, but Anne-Marie insisted firmly that her mistress would have none and would rather be left alone. Reluctantly he took his leave, promising to call again next morning to enquire and planting a damp kiss on Sophie's

forehead. In spite of his kindness all day, Sophie heaved a sigh of relief when the door closed behind him. She turned to Anne-Marie quickly. "Is Maman in her room?"

"No, Mlle. Sophie, your mother has gone out."

"Gone out?" Sophie echoed aghast. "But she promised to take me somewhere when I came back. Is she returning soon?"

"She said she would be very late, Mlle. Sophie," Anne-Marie brought out unwillingly. Her warm heart could not bear to see the disappointment spreading over Sophie's face like a dark cloud. Sophie controlled her tears with difficulty, this was to be her last evening with her mother and now she would have to spend it alone. All her pleasure in her assortment of gay trifles picked up in the shops of the Palais Royale was gone and she gave them a querulous push, her lower lip trembling. Anne-Marie, watching sympathetically, said, "I'll make your favourite pudding for dinner, Mlle. Sophie, shall I?"

"I don't feel hungry," Sophie replied in a small voice, "I may as well go to bed early."

In the end the maids persuaded her to eat in the warmth of the salon, tempting her appetite with special dishes and trying to bring a smile to her face with their cheerful chatter. But though Sophie appreciated their efforts and pretended a gaiety she did not feel her spirits were depressed and she began to feel glad that tomorrow would find her back at school where at least she had no lack of friends. Once supper had been cleared away she curled up on the satin upholstered sofa with one of the new books M. Laroche had bought her and became so immersed in the story that she was quite surprised when the clock struck midnight. The fire had died down and she realised with a shiver that the room was getting cold. She took up a heavy silver candlestick and prepared to go to bed, but as she went into the small hall the front door was swung open suddenly and Marie-Françoise, laughing and looking radiant, came in, followed by a young and handsome Chasseur Captain.

"Sophie," her mother said crossly when she saw her

standing there, her big dark eyes illuminated by the candlelight, "Why ever aren't you in bed long ago? Do you know what time it is?"

"I was reading, Maman, and forgot the time."

"Reading, always reading! Say good evening to Citoyen Capitaine Bresson and then go up to bed at once. Did you have a nice day?" she threw over her shoulder carelessly, suddenly conscious that she had not seen her daughter since the morning.

"Yes, thank you, Maman."

The young chasseur came forward and took her hand and Sophie curtsied politely. He was very good-looking indeed, with dark curly hair, brown eyes fringed with very long dark lashes, shining white teeth and a beautiful Roman nose. "How old are you, ma petite?" he asked in a deep, slow voice with a slight Gascon accent, which she found reassuring and kindly.

"Nearly eleven, Monsieur."

"I am quite sure, Mlle. Sophie, that in a few more years you will be as beautiful as your lovely mother."

"The Citoyen Capitaine is very kind."

"The Citoyen Capitaine is a flatterer, like all soldiers," Marie-Françoise broke in, taking his arm possessively. "Away with you, Sophie. You have to be up early in the morning, don't forget, so as to be back at school."

The remembrance of her mother's earlier promise, broken with such unconcern, and the thought of her departure in the morning, made Sophie's large eyes fill with tears. Marie-Françoise, intent on getting the Captain to herself, did not notice them but the young man, who had been touched by the sight of Sophie's slight figure, pale face and dark disordered curls, very reminiscent of his own youngest sister in Pau, did notice them and bent down to say, "Don't look so unhappy, Mlle. Sophie. Where do you go to school?"

"At St. Germain."

"And haven't you many little friends there?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"I thought you might. Perhaps one day when I am

passing I may be permitted to call on you and bring you and your friends some bon-bons?"

"Thank you, Monsieur," Sophie said, wiping her eyes quickly and giving him a charming smile which transformed her too serious little face into something quite enchanting.

1802

"THAT MONSTER, Bonaparte!" Marie-Françoise said petulantly, "He is the cause of all my troubles, he and he alone." She was lying on her rose-coloured bed, the draperies giving some semblance of colour to her very pale cheeks. She flicked dejectedly at the pile of bills littering the coverlet. "Bills, bills, I never receive anything else these days. How am I ever going to pay them all?"

"I don't know, Mama," Sophie said unhappily. She was sitting in a chair by her mother's bedside and reached down to pick up one of the fallen bills. She smoothed it out and read:

To: One India muslin dress

One silk gauze dress embroidered with butterflies

2 Cashmere shawls

and an astronomical sum at the foot.

"Did you really have to have more new dresses, Mama—and two shawls—isn't that rather extravagant? Why, you have at least four in your cupboard already."

"Now, Sophie, don't you scold me. I really cannot be expected to make do with last year's dresses."

"But, Mama, if we must economise?"

Marie-Françoise was not listening. She went on, half to herself, "Now that you are nearly fifteen, I can no longer afford to keep you at school, I must really take you out into society and find you a rich husband. But where is the money coming from to buy you suitable dresses? My credit at Leroy's is exhausted. If only that monster, Bonaparte, had not initiated investigations into M. Laroche's last contracts and made it necessary for him to flee to America. America! Why, M. Talleyrand says it is a barbarous place, but where else could the poor man go to escape the First Consul's long arm? And then your Uncle Leon arrested suddenly and sent to the 'dry guillotine'. No sooner will he arrive in Guinea than he will die of fever, it would have been more merciful to guillotine him outright. Thank goodness your poor Aunt Amelie did not live to see him go. Poor Amelie! my remaining relative gone, I have no one to whom I can turn." And weak tears came into Marie-Françoise's beautiful blue eyes. The winter had been especially harsh and she had had an infection which had taken a long time to clear up. At one time it had even been feared that she had a consumption like her elder sister.

Poor Sophie, who had no idea that it was only the weakness of convalescence which had occasioned this outburst from her mother, furrowed her forehead painfully. She was still rather small and thin for her age and she had an over-developed sense of duty towards what she considered the fecklessness of her mother, partly because Tante Amelie had always said to her, "We must help your poor mother as best we can and try to understand her, for she has suffered greatly. No one who has not been under imminent sentence of death can know what she has gone through."

But Marie-Françoise had not weathered a Revolution, the Reign of Terror and a threatened execution to be cast down for long. Her fragile beauty hid a native shrewd-

ness and determination, coupled with an invincible optimism that something would always turn up at the last moment to rescue her from her morass of debts and difficulties.

"Mama," Sophie said nervously, "would it be a good idea to appeal to the First Consul's wife, you have always been such friends with her?"

"I have no doubt she would be willing enough to do what she could, but even Mme. Bonaparte might find it difficult to persuade her husband that it was right to help someone implicated with a Jacobin brother-in-law and an unwise Army contractor."

There was a loud knocking at the front door which resounded through the little house and soon after Anne-Marie was heard in bitter argument with a man's voice. Marie-Françoise put her hands over her ears and made a face. "More creditors. Oh dear, oh dear." Sophie's pale serious face went whiter still. She hated these hammerings on the front door and the acrimonious arguments which ensued. Nothing in her sheltered existence at school, the emphasis on good manners and the art of conversation, the lessons in English, Italian, history, literature and mathematics, the sessions of soup-making and lectures on the art of domestic economy had prepared her for dealing with her mother's improvident way of life when, with more bills arriving daily, she would quite happily sell a valuable objet d'art, not to buy food for the household or settle her outstanding debts, but to lavish it on a frivolous bonnet, a pair of flimsy slippers, a silk embroidered gown and other expensive and unnecessary luxuries. She had tried earnestly on her days at home to index her mother's bills into degrees of urgency, but had been frustrated constantly in her attempts to straighten things out by Marie-Françoise's declaring that all talk of money gave her a violent headache.

While Sophie was still sitting there, twisting her hands in her lap dismally, there was a further knocking at the outer door and she stood up quickly, feeling she could not bear the sound of another scene. She walked to the

window and looked out through the rosy silk curtains at the grey sky which gave no promise of spring as yet, then her glance fell on a shiny carriage standing in the street below, drawn by two sleek black horses. This was no creditor, or if so, a very important one. She allowed a faint glimmer of hope to steal over her. "Please let it be some good news for once," she pleaded silently.

Anne-Marie came into the bedroom looking rather less glum than she had done lately. She muttered frequently about finding another situation and each time Sophie reflected sadly that they were lucky to have her still, considering the wages she was owed.

"M. le Ministre is here and wishes to know if you are well enough to receive him."

"M. le Ministre?"

"M. Talleyrand." Anne-Marie's round rough face with its broken veins looked blandly satisfied. Although all citizens were equal some citizens were more important than others and not every household had the privilege of receiving the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Marie-Françoise jumped up from her bed quickly and ran to the mirror. "Oh, I'm so pale, where is my rouge?" She wrenched at the drawers of her dressing-table, producing pots of cosmetics and sat down to improve her appearance with the delicate swift sureness of an artist. "Quick, Sophie, find my slippers, there's a pet. Anne-Marie, tell M. le Ministre I shall be with him in a moment."

When she drifted into her salon a quarter of an hour later she fully deserved the compliments which M. Talleyrand hastened to pay her. He held her hands tightly after he had kissed them and looked into her eyes which, with their light touch of silver paint on the upper lids, looked even larger and more lustrous than in their natural state. "Madame, I rejoice to see you are looking better. Paris could ill afford to lose one of its brighter ornaments."

"Monsieur, you are a flatterer as always. But come, pray seat yourself and tell me all the gossip. I am sadly

out of touch since the abrupt departure of M. Laroche to America and my illness."

Anne-Marie came in with a tray of glasses and a decanter of wine and some biscuits and they settled down to an exchange of news. Marie-Françoise was well aware that the busy Minister would hardly call on her in the middle of the morning without some ulterior purpose, but she knew better than to ask outright what that purpose was and knew also that it would be stated obliquely when it was. So she listened intently to all he had to say in his deep voice, laughing prettily at his epigrams, becoming more and more convinced that Talleyrand knew of her present difficulties and had come to propose some solution.

For half an hour he spoke of trivialities, then he leaned back, remaining silent for a few minutes, tapping the gold knobbed cane he carried with a disconcerting metallic harshness against his bad leg. When he spoke again it was with a slight intensification of emphasis and Marie-Françoise was immediately on the alert.

"Paris is becoming more cosmopolitan every day with tens of thousands of Englishmen pouring across the Channel to see if we are such savages as we are painted. And then we have these petty German princes, hurrying to Paris to make sure of their indemnities which France has been given the right to fix by the terms of the Treaty of Lunéville. Added to them, Italians, Dutchmen, Danes and Poles, all anxious to establish separate states under our patronage. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep account of those who are our true friends and those who are our secret enemies. Some of those in authority now are, to say the least, not as accustomed as we are, Madame, to the usages of polite society. If I knew of a discreet woman, one who could listen intelligently and sympathetically, who could move easily in exalted circles, whose position as a 'ci-devant' vicomtesse, say, might allay the suspicions of those who are not altogether happy about our present republican status, she could be of the greatest possible use to me."

"And if this woman could be found?"

"She would find that my Ministry would not be ungenerous in settling any outstanding debts she might have." His small green eyes flicked meaningfully over Marie-Françoise's face, then away again.

"I understand perfectly, Monsieur."

"Nothing to be committed to writing, Madame. I have one or two prudent young men whose visits to you would not be remarked and who would be happy to pass on any information you might gather, or you could always approach me unobtrusively at one of the many social functions which we both frequent. I would be particularly pleased for you to make the acquaintance of His Serene Highness Prince Karl-August of Siedmar-Riedenberg who is expected in Paris shortly. He is a personable young man, I believe, with a great admiration for French culture."

"And I would meet this Prince—Charles-Auguste, is it?—at some dinner party in your house?"

Talleyrand inclined his head, then rose slowly and kissed her hand. "I have the utmost confidence in your success, Madame."

So it was that Marie-Françoise, able once more to indulge her extravagant tastes to the full, found herself making witty conversation to a succession of foreigners who, delighted with her low, pleasant voice, perfect manners, large affecting blue eyes and exquisite figure beneath the soft floating dresses of pale silk and muslin, were easily led on to speak more fully than they intended about matters which should have remained secret.

Soon the foremost of these admirers was monopolising her society completely. His Serene Highness Prince Karl-August Theodore Maximilian of Siedmar-Riedenberg was a tall fair-haired serious young man of twenty-two or -three. There had been nothing in the Prince's admirable upbringing by a succession of learned and unworldly German tutors to prepare him for dealing with an experienced, quick-witted Frenchwoman such as Marie-Françoise Victoire, former Vicomtesse de Monteval.

The Prince had only succeeded to his principality eighteen months before on the death of his father, a rigid martinet with a complete abhorrence of new ideas. Karl-August had had for one tutor an earnest professor with a secret admiration for Rousseau and together they had discussed behind locked doors the new principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and the possibility of putting them into practice in a German state, tempered with a German respect for law and order. Together they had drawn up a more liberal constitution for Sledmar Riedenberg which would be brought into operation when the Prince succeeded his father in due course. Unfortunately the old professor died before this event took place and Prince Karl-August had found himself saddled on his succession with a determined group of elderly ministers who had no difficulty in frustrating his attempts at liberalisation with talk of lengthy legal procedures to be followed and the necessity for no changes until the unsettled political situation was resolved. The Prince was not an autocratic young man, he had been taught to mistrust autocrats, so that he hesitated to over-ride them. The defeat of Austria at Marengo had shaken the ministers' faith in the traditional Austrian alliance and half of them were now determined on throwing in their lot with France, which might even mean an extension of their frontiers and the promotion of their principality into a kingdom. Karl-August had been urged to go to Paris to extract the best possible terms from the First Consul and his Foreign Minister, while the remaining ministers, strongly against a French alliance were sending out secret emissaries to sound out the Austrian and Russian Emperors. Siedmar Riedenberg had a great deal to offer either side, strategically speaking, and Talleyrand had impressed on the First Consul the necessity of treading carefully. Karl-August must be flattered, not bullied like the other German princes, so he was received very politely at the Tuileries and invited to dine both with the First Consul and his Foreign Minister on several occasions.

But Karl-August was taken aback at the rather bungled and perfunctory ceremonial in the former royal palace, by the dirty boots and not very clean linen of some of the French generals present on these occasions and the loud voices and over-red faces and hands of their wives who looked as though they were unused to palaces or polite society of any sort.

Equality and fraternity were all very well, and Karl-August was a firm supporter of them both in theory, but his upbringing at a stiff German court had made him very conscious of the deficiencies here. His father had visited Versailles in his youth and ever since he could remember Karl-August had had it impressed upon him that Versailles and the French were the model to which all courts and courtiers should aspire so that it was a sad disappointment to see the tarnished reality.

The dinners at M. Talleyrand's were more formal and sumptuous but even here he could never forget the Foreign Minister's ambiguous status as an ex-bishop and revolutionary and he was embarrassed to find himself received, not by the Foreign Minister's wife, but by his mistress, Mme. Grand, a woman of unsurpassed stupidity, albeit very beautiful. So that when he was introduced to Mme. de Monteval, who was politely deferential, charming to look at and who made delightfully easy conversation with him after dinner, he was eager to improve his acquaintance with her. In no time at all he was a daily visitor at her small and exquisitely furnished house in the Rue de Lille and she was accompanying him to all the sights of the Paris he was eager to see. The fact that she had lost her husband on the guillotine and was a member of the vanished aristocracy enhanced her charms in his eyes. He frequently told her how brave she was to adapt herself to this new strange world without losing any of the graces of the 'ancien regime' and Marie-Françoise, without a flicker of a silver-painted eyelid, would say softly, "I won't deny it has been a hard struggle, Your Highness, to keep up my standards, but I felt I owed it to my dead husband and our little daughter."

Karl-August firmly believed that this womanly paragon scrimped and saved every penny to send her daughter to a school kept by Queen Marie-Antoinette's ex-lady-in-waiting, where she could learn the same good manners as her mother, and that she herself had devised the simple dresses which suited her so well. He would have been shocked at the vast bills which Leroy dispatched monthly to an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the account for Sophie's schooling was also settled. Marie-Françoise's jewellery from M. Laroche had long ago been sold to defray her living expenses but, although she bitterly regretted its absence now when she went out in the evenings, the Prince found it very affecting when she appeared with a single childish row of pearls round her slender white throat, given to her as she explained prettily, by her parents at her first communion. All his chivalrous instincts were aroused and he treated her with the utmost care and consideration, so much like a delicate piece of porcelain that Marie-Françoise was at first highly amused, then impatient and annoyed.

"These Germans are absurdly sentimental and romantic," she complained to M. Talleyrand when they found themselves alone in a small ante-room one night at a ball. "All this Charles-Auguste does is to write poems comparing me to flowers, to butterflies, to Venetian glass. Is he never to come to the point of touching me in case I break?"

Talleyrand laughed and pressed her hand. "Patience, Madame, from our point of view everything is going admirably."

And indeed Karl-August, bewildered a little by French volubility and suave double-talk, appeared each evening in Marie-Françoise's small salon to discuss in vague terms the latest French offer and the counter-proposals from Russia and Austria which his ministers forwarded to him in cypher. Marie-Françoise said very little, she let him talk aloud to himself, putting in an occasional interested and seemingly innocent question to help matters along, but she was quick to pick up the hints he did let

fall and pass them along to the right quarter. The Prince's minister in attendance, secretary and aide-de-camp, who had accompanied him to Paris, would have been horrified at his indiscretions, but they had assumed too easily from Marie-Françoise's smooth pretty face and voluptuous figure, and the superficial enquiries they had made, that only one thought was in their master's mind.

Marie-Françoise would have been only too delighted if the Prince had made some move in that direction. She was becoming exceedingly bored with her new role of impecunious, hard-done-by respectable widow, who dispensed coffee and little cakes to a decorous suitor, listened intelligently to his talk and played the piano while he sang, in a pleasing light tenor, sentimental German songs about love which he invested with meaning looks. Paris that summer was very gay, with illuminations and fireworks every night, innumerable balls and receptions given by and for the hundreds of foreigners who had hastened to Paris during the lull of the Peace of Amiens. Marie-Françoise regretted that she could not have enjoyed herself with a succession of handsome dashing English Milords, who could have driven her furiously through the streets of Paris in their own smart phaetons, and indeed she had even got as far as asking Talleyrand if she could not be relieved of this solemn young German who seemed incapable of seizing the opportunities offered him.

"And what is more," she added, "when he comes to visit me he leaves his aide-de-camp sitting outside the door, in case he needs to call for help, I suppose."

Talleyrand smiled and assured her that it would be foolhardy to lose the hold she had over him. "I am sure, Madame," he added, "that you are clever enough to precipitate matters a little. The Prince is bound to return home soon and if he were to take you with him your financial future would be assured."

Marie-Françoise pouted. "You are surely not serious, my dear Minister, me to leave Paris, you must be mad."

"It need not be forever, Madame. May I remind you that we have settled without question the large bills that are sent to us monthly and if, in addition, the Prince were to set you up in your own household, you would have an ample competence both for your daughter's dowry and your own ultimate retirement to a charming estate in the country."

Marie-Françoise sighed. "I hope France is grateful for the hours of boredom I have enjoyed for her sake."

Fortunately for her Karl-August was brought to the point of making her his mistress very shortly afterwards. This aspect of his education had not been neglected, having been undertaken at the age of seventeen or so by a buxom, well-scrubbed country girl produced with military brusqueness by one of his tutors and afterwards pensioned off and married to a Court forester. But the difference between one of his lesser subjects and a former French vicomtesse of impeccable propriety and breeding had seemed to him vast and Marie-Françoise had to use all her wiles before he succumbed.

She had been in her gayest mood on that momentous evening, wearing a magnificent new creation by Leroy which left little to anyone's imagination. The Prince had taken her to dine at a restaurant and then, dismissing all his attendants for once, they strolled home along the boulevards, pausing to watch the fireworks exploding colourfully in the dark blue sky. Marie-Françoise clapped her hands with delight like a small child and the Prince, watching her face illuminated by the flickering cascades had sighed and pressed her arm. "It will be hard, Madame, to leave you and Paris, I don't know which is the more lovely."

Marie-Françoise turned to him quickly. "Oh no, Your Highness, I could not bear to say good-bye, must you go so soon?"

"I have been here over-long already." He looked down at her face and saw big tears rolling down her cheeks. Marie-Françoise had no difficulty in forcing decorative tears from her eyes if it suited her purpose.

The Prince was appalled. He took her hands in his. "Chère Madame, do not weep, it is difficult enough for me to set the date of my departure as it is."

Marie-Françoise sobbed heartrendingly and the Prince, looking round helplessly, saw that they were at the entrance to her street and led her quickly towards her own house. Once they were inside he took her in his arms and Marie-Françoise leant against him confidingly, giving every now and again a small gulping sob which redoubled the Prince's efforts to comfort her.

"If you could support me upstairs, Monseigneur," she murmured huskily and the Prince gallantly lifted her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs into her bedroom, laying her gently down on the rose silk bed. Marie-Françoise lay there in beautiful disarray, her pale silk dress falling off her shoulders and revealing part of one white bosom. She wiped her eyes carefully with a wisp of lawn and lace and Karl-August stood looking down on her entranced. She gazed back at him with great limpid eyes and, very delicately, Karl-August put out his hand to touch her dazzlingly white skin, very different from the rough red skin of his peasant girl. She stretched her arms out to him invitingly and he seized her hungrily, tearing the silk of her dress in his hurry to uncover more of her delicious body, smelling faintly and delectably of flowers. Marie-Françoise gave a small satisfied sigh and pressed herself close against him. "Charles-Auguste, Charles-Auguste," she whispered softly in his ear, "you took so long. Did you think I was made of marble?"

The Prince's aide-de-camp appeared punctually at nine in the morning and found he had to kick his heels in the hall until noon when his master eventually came downstairs, looking weary and dishevelled, but eminently satisfied.

When Marie-Françoise next saw Talleyrand he raised his eyebrows at her and gave her a brief smile. "I have heard, my dear Madame, that His Serene Highness is very seldom in his own hotel these days—or nights."

"How quickly news travels to your ears, M. Talleyrand," Marie-Françoise said with a complacent look.

"And has the boredom about which you were complaining at our last meeting been relieved?"

"Tolerably so, Monsieur, tolerably so."

Karl-August was completely enslaved by Marie-Françoise and she herself had not been displeased to discover in him a virile and eager pupil. When he could no longer with decency delay his return to his principality he did not have much difficulty in persuading Marie-Françoise to accompany him.

Sophie was astonished when her mother drove out to collect her from school in a very imposing carriage, with crown-emblazoned crests on the side panels, and told her that in a few days' time they were going to Germany.

"But why Germany, Mama? It's such a long way from here."

"I know, my pet, but I don't want to leave you behind, do I?"

Bewildered, Sophie went up to pack her few possessions and then, weeping bitterly, she embraced all her friends in turn, promising faithfully to write to them every week and never to lose touch with them. Marie-Françoise looked on impatiently, every now and again urging her to hurry or they would never get back to Paris in time.

"In time for what?" Sophie asked, her face disfigured by tears. "Oh, Mama, I must just say good-bye to Leonie, I won't be a minute."

As the carriage drove away Sophie leaned out of the window forlornly, waving at her friends till they were lost to sight. Her mother was annoyed with her for showing so little pleasure at the prospect lying before her. To tell the truth Sophie dreaded all change. Since her aunt's death school had been the one safe place where nothing ever seemed to alter. Although she looked forward to it with heady joy, she was in a continual state of worry when she stayed with her mother, upset by the unpaid bills and by her mother's unpredictability and unreliabil-

ity, and she had come to rely overmuch on the safe and comfortable friendships with her contemporaries, from whom she had few secrets. True, now they were growing older one or two of them had been threatened with marriage to an unknown man chosen by their parents which tended to set them somewhat apart from their circle, but most of them were still happily heedless of the outside world. To be sure, marriage and romantic love were things they speculated about endlessly, they devoured the novels of the day, and they knew from older sisters that marriage would mean a great change in their lives and perhaps a measure of freedom they had never yet known. They knew it involved going to live with a strange man about whom one knew very little or nothing and being subject to him, which did not sound very much like freedom; they knew it involved having children which could be tedious and painful, although ultimately rewarding, but as to exactly how these babies were formed in the first place they were completely and absolutely ignorant.

So on the thirteen-mile journey to Paris Marie-Françoise endeavoured to explain, without actually being too explicit, why she had suddenly decided to leave France in the company of His Serene Highness Prince Karl-August of Siedmar Riedenberg. By the time they reached the house in the Rue de Lille Sophie was really no clearer as to why she had been snatched out of school with such precipitation and she was still asking "But why, Mama?" until Marie-Françoise, bored with her daughter's innocent obtuseness, said shortly and dismissively, "Because I wish to go."

Sophie found the small house in an uproar, with trunks and boxes in every room filled to the brim with her mother's clothes and more things to be packed arriving every minute, delivered to the door from milliners, shoemakers, furriers, jewellers and dressmakers. Evidently since she was last at home her mother's circumstances had changed completely. Anne-Marie and Lucie were flying round in a state of great excitement, too busy to answer any of her questions and after a quick meal,

Sophie found herself dragged out to be fitted with new gowns, coats and hats, gloves and slippers, which left her head reeling at the unimagined expense.

On their return there was a carriage waiting outside their door, with the self-same crest on its panels, and Marie-Françoise cried out at the sight of it, "Oh, he's here already, we must have been longer than I thought. Now, Sophie dear, remember to curtsy and kiss his hand, His Highness sets great store by proper etiquette."

Sophie followed her mother obediently into the small salon where a tall fair young man, his dark green coat decorated with a blazing star of diamonds and rubies, was standing stiffly by the fireplace, one arm along the mantel-shelf. His face lit up remarkably when Marie-Françoise made him a graceful curtsy. He put out a hand to help her up. "I thought you were never coming, chère Madame."

"Forgive me," said Marie-Françoise.

"I forgive you anything," he said softly, taking her hand in his and pressing it to his lips fervently.

"Your Highness," said Marie-Françoise, "may I present my daughter, Sophie." Sophie, coming from behind her mother, sank into a curtsy and kissed the Prince's hand as she had been told.

The Prince, looking slightly disconcerted at her sudden appearance, asked stiffly, "And how old are you, Mlle. Sophie?"

"Fourteen, Your Highness."

"Fourteen, eh," replied the Prince, looking her up and down as if he could not make up his mind whether he should say she was big or small for her age. "And you are at school at Mme. Campan's?"

"Yes, Monsieur. Monseigneur," Sophie hastily corrected herself at a look from her mother. "That is to say, I was until this morning."

"Yes, of course," said the Prince uncomfortably and Marie-Françoise, smiling a little at his discomfiture, said, "That will be all, Sophie, you may go to your room."

"Yes, Mama." Sophie curtsied again and went slowly

upstairs. She stood in the middle of her familiar bedroom, pressing her hands to her aching head and looking round at the piles of boxes which the two maids had carried in from their carriage and deposited on the floor and chairs. She wished she knew what was happening and why, but she had been brought up to unquestioning obedience to her mother's dictates and knew she had to resign herself. There was not much point in settling down to write letters to her friends as yet, so, sighing, she sat down on her bed and took up a book. But tonight she could not, as she usually did, lose herself in the story and she kept thinking of all the friends she had left behind with such abruptness and weeping a little as she imagined them all sitting round the large table in the salon at Mme. Campan's busy with their needlework while a mistress read aloud to them.

By the time their large cavalcade set out on the long journey to Germany Sophie was thoroughly miserable and apprehensive as to what lay ahead of them. Sophie and her mother were travelling in the same berline as Karl-August, while behind them came the Prince's minister in attendance, his secretary and A.D.C., and her mother's two maids, the Prince's servants, the servants to the entourage and wagonloads of baggage. Each day's itinerary had to be planned well in advance, with dinner, a night's lodging and fresh horses to be found for so many and sometimes the execrable roads or an unsatisfactory inn necessitated delays and altercations which were very tedious. But the Prince seemed to bear it all with great good humour. He was too much in love to be irked by difficulties, which in any case were all taken care of by his subordinates. Though he quite saw the necessity for it, he was inhibited by Sophie's presence and could not help wishing she were less silent and shy, more like her mother. She sat upright in one corner with her hands folded demurely in her lap, watching with big solemn dark eyes every move he made. He found it extremely difficult to keep his hands off his luscious Marie-Françoise during the long boring lurchings

over the potholed French and German roads and he could barely wait for the evening's halt when Sophie was packed off to bed after an early supper and he could be alone with her mother at last, and after the first two days Sophie was banished to the carriage with the two maids.

They clattered into Riedenberg, the capital of the principality, exactly ten days after they left Paris. The town was dominated by the Prince's castle, a medieval fortress on a hill, with the steep roofs of the town's houses clustered round it on the lower slopes. Marie-Françoise and Sophie were established in the best inn for the time being, where a whole floor was given over to them. The landlord, bent almost double, displayed the rooms to the Prince's critical gaze and only after he had satisfied himself that everything was in order, did he kiss Marie-Françoise's hand lingeringly and ride up to his castle, promising to be back later. The rooms were dark and panelled in dark woods, with bare dark wood floors and tiny diamond-paned windows which let in very little light. The beds were huge, hung with dark woollen curtains and with great puffy eiderdowns, and the wardrobes loomed menacingly from the shadows, carved with intricate patterns of flowers and grapes.

Marie-Françoise subsided gracefully on to the large four-poster bed in the principal bedroom and sighed deeply. "Thank goodness we have no more travelling for the moment. I don't know about you, my pet, but I feel seasick from all the motion. What gloomy rooms, I am suffocated by all this dark wood. I hope to goodness the Prince will find us a house that lets in some light and air."

"Are we to have a house here, in Riedenberg, Mama?" Sophie asked, taking off her hat and cloak and placing them carefully on a chair.

"I don't intend staying in this inn for longer than I need, you may be sure. My furniture is coming on from Paris."

"Shall we be here for long, Mama?"

"Who knows, my little one? It depends how much I miss Paris. Perhaps we shall find you some upright young German nobleman for a husband—should you like that?" She yawned and stretched lazily, then laughed as Sophie gazed at her in dumb misery. "Great heavens, my dear Sophie, stop looking so worried, we're here to enjoy ourselves if we can. I haven't seen you smile once since we left Paris, what is the matter with you? Even Egalité looks happier than you, don't you, my precious?"

"Nothing, Mama," Sophie answered docilely, picking up her cloak and hat and going through to her own bedroom.

In no time at all the news had spread round the town that the Prince had arrived home with a French mistress and everyone was eager to catch sight of her. Marie-Françoise and Sophie had very little opportunity to explore the small town for no sooner did they emerge from the doors of the inn than they were surrounded by a curious crowd who impeded their progress by sheer numbers. When the Prince's carriage arrived to take them to the castle for a formal presentation to the Prince's mother and sister a few days later the coachman could scarcely force his way through the people who had run out into the streets to glimpse the famous Frenchwoman. Sophie was really frightened by the stares and subdued murmurs which followed them on their progress up the street, but Marie-Françoise, amused by the curiosity, gave them their money's worth by waving and smiling to them all with regal composure.

The Prince's sister, older than he was, was tall, ugly and ungainly, and his mother was a little wizened old woman encased in old-fashioned stiff brocades which gave the appearance of keeping her upright as she moved slowly forward, nodding her head incessantly as she acknowledged her subjects' bows. The great hall of the castle where they were received was crowded with dignitaries of the court and their wives, and representatives of the chief families in the principality, all as anxious

as the townspeople to see Mme. de Monteval and her daughter. Marie-Françoise had dressed with great care for the occasion and had lavished equal attention on Sophie's toilette, so that they made a charming picture as, escorted by a chamberlain, they advanced gracefully up the hall together and curtsied with the utmost elegance, first to the Prince, then to the Dowager Princess and lastly to her gawky daughter. The Dowager Princess made a few gracious remarks in passable but stilted French and the daughter, eyeing with envy Marie-Françoise's short curls dressed high on her head, delicate make-up and pale embroidered silk dress with its high waistline, inclined her head awkwardly and added a few more gracious remarks in not such a good accent. After that there were general introductions by the Prince who accompanied them with the utmost formality from group to group and, after a rather meagre buffet supper, they were free to return to the inn.

Marie-Françoise pulled off her gloves when they had reached their sitting-room and gave vent to uninhibited laughter. "So my precious, you have survived your first presentation at court! What delicious provincial dullness. Did you see the dresses that the Prince's sister and the other women were wearing? Where could they have got them? Thank goodness we have got that over and need not go again for a year at least. Poor Charles-Auguste, how can he stand it? When we have a house of our own we shall set up a rival court which shall be a little less tedious, I promise you."

The Prince found them a house a mile or two outside the town walls, which had been built as a summer residence for an aunt of his. It was a pretty baroque building set in a small park of its own, painted pink and white and, although not entirely convenient, for the bedrooms were small and cramped, had three large reception rooms opening out of each other and a large terrace overlooking fountains and formal gardens which suited Marie-Françoise's purpose very well. With new furniture, curtains and carpets from Paris and freshly

painted walls in a pale apple-green, it made a fitting background for the beauty of its hostess and the house-warming party to which she invited a hundred or more guests was a prelude to regular twice-weekly salons to which anyone could come. The spacious salons resounded to the noise of dancing and conversation and the suppers prepared by an imported French chef, were entirely memorable. The Prince's mistress was much admired and few of the men could censure him for being completely infatuated with her.

The few who did censure him were horrified at the amount of money, contributed in taxes by his people, which was lavished on Mme. de Monteval and her household. She thought nothing of sending to Paris for a new dress or French food and wines for her sumptuous parties and rumours grew apace about her reckless extravagances. Needless to say the women, except for a few emancipated ones, who were always welcome at her parties, resented her presence intensely, but there was little they could do about it, except to augment and embroider the stories of her outrageous behaviour. Twice a week their husbands, sons and brothers rode or drove out to the little château in the park and returned in the early hours, satiated with good wine and food and excited by intelligent and witty conversation. Their only chance of seeing her was when Mme. de Monteval appeared at the Court Opera in one of her beautiful scanty gowns, a diadem perched high on the studied elegance of her short curled hair, and then every detail of her appearance was examined through opera glasses and mediocre copies would be produced by the town's seamstresses, which succeeded in looking merely ludicrous on short, plump German figures.

Marie-Françoise really cared very little for anyone's opinion of her. She was enjoying herself immensely as the uncrowned Princess of Siedmar Riedenberg. Charles-Auguste was a thoroughly satisfactory lover and even if he were not, there were plenty of other men willing and able to take his place; she had only to express a wish

for it to be gratified; and the amount of information she was able to send to Talleyrand by secret cypher meant that a tidy sum was being invested for her in France. This had been Talleyrand's idea not hers, Marie-Françoise had never been known to take thought for the day after tomorrow, but the statements she received monthly from Paris gave her a warm comfortable glow when she had read and added them to a growing pile in her bureau.

Her only concern was that Sophie, now at last growing taller and developing into a really attractive girl, should make a good marriage, but she hesitated to marry her off to a German, however wellborn or wealthy, for neither she nor Sophie had any intention of leaving France for ever and she knew that Sophie, who corresponded regularly with her old school friends, pined for France more than she did. Being Marie-Françoise she tended to shelve the matter from one week to the next, making determined resolutions once a month to write to friends in Paris asking for suggestions and forgetting them in the next moment in the urgent necessity for deciding the menu for supper or the dress to wear for the evening's reception, comforting herself with the thought that Sophie was still only fifteen.

Sophie herself was happier than she had thought she could be away from France. She had enough vanity to know that she had improved greatly in looks and figure since her arrival in Riedenberg a year before and she enjoyed making the best of herself in the exquisite new dresses her mother provided lavishly. But in spite of her own lax morals Marie-Françoise was very strict with her daughter and never allowed her to put in more than a brief appearance at her receptions so that Sophie, who adored dancing and was much sought after as a partner, had to make the most of it. She had learned to acknowledge her partners' gallantry with pretty phrases and make reasonably intelligent conversation with the older men who spoke to her, so that Marie-Françoise was much complimented on the grace and charm of her

young daughter. But though Sophie had fancied herself in love once or twice, she was, as her mother wished it to be, remarkably untouched by the feverish atmosphere in which she lived. She devoted a great many hours each day to serious reading with an elderly scholar recommended by the Prince and she wrote long letters to her friends in France. The Prince had given her two horses of her own and, under the guidance of an old groom, she had quickly become an accomplished horsewoman and rode daily.

Sophie was not really at her ease with Karl-August, who was too young to be regarded like an uncle as M. Laroche had been and was too old and too important to be treated with any familiarity. He always spoke to her with forced joviality as though he found her existence irksome and loaded her with embarrassing gifts to make up for his dislike, which Sophie had difficulty in acknowledging with becoming gratitude.

Marie-Françoise had been unwise in that, once she had been formally presented at Court, she had made no further attempt to visit the Prince's mother and sister, dismissing them as dowdy and boring with no real importance in her scheme of life. She had been told so often that her receptions, at which the Prince was always present, were the real court of Siedmar Riedenberg that she had come to believe it. But the two Princesses bitterly resented the usurpation of their functions by this beautiful immoral Frenchwoman, who flaunted her power over their son and brother with such shamelessness and denigrated everything German.

Protestations by the Dowager Princess had been of no avail. "Karl," she had said to her son, "it is all very well to have a discreet mistress tucked away somewhere, but you have made no attempt to conceal your unbridled passion for this Mme. de Monteval. Why, she is old enough to be your mother."

Karl-August looked at her coldly. "What I do in my own principality is my own affair, Madame, and now

that I have succeeded you have no further right to dictate to me."

His mother twisted the rings on her gnarled fingers. "You have a duty to produce heirs, my son. It is high time that you thought of marriage."

Karl-August paced up and down uneasily. He was not entirely unaware of his duty in this respect and even Marie-Françoise had spoken of it the other day. He had been furious with her at the time, stopping her mouth with angry kisses, but the idea had lodged at the back of his mind and came up at intervals to disturb him.

Now he said with sarcastic emphasis, "There's plenty of time for that, I am only twenty-three and not noticeably failing in health and strength."

"Accidents will happen, you could fall ill at any time. I have good reports of Princess Louisa of Altenberg or the Princess Sophia, you have only to say the word."

"I will not hear of it," he answered shortly, leaving the room in a cold rage and ordering his carriage to take him at once to Mme. de Monteval. His mother's face stiffened with an anger equal to his own and she determined to find an immediate ally among the Court dignitaries.

1804

THE DOWAGER PRINCESS and his Serene Highness's Minister of Finance, Baron von Rednitz, were playing piquet in one of the turret rooms of the castle high above the town. There was an autumnal chill in the air and a huge log fire was blazing in the grate. The light from this glinted on the spectacles of the old, shrivelled Princess

and those of the stoop-shouldered man sitting opposite her, his thin lips pulled back over his long discoloured teeth as he considered the cards in his hand.

"You have no further proof that the Frenchwoman is sending information to Paris, Baron?" the Princess said suddenly, laying down her cards with a sharp slap.

"Unfortunately no, Your Highness. Although her incoming and outgoing letters are intercepted discreetly and examined we have been able to prove nothing. She must use a cypher, I imagine, but to date we have been unable to break it."

"I heard from a usually reliable source this morning that Mme. de Monteval is three months gone with child. If nothing else that proves my son capable of providing heirs." Her voice was bitter.

"The other ministers and myself have done our best to persuade His Highness that he should marry, Madame, but he refuses to hear of it. If this news should be true I am afraid he will procrastinate still more."

"We must rid ourselves of her." The old Princess gazed into the flames. "The principality will be ruined by her extravagances if this liaison continues. My son is bewitched by her."

The Baron removed his spectacles and looked meditatively at the old Princess's face, cold and malevolent in the flickering firelight. He was a Prussian, fanatically loyal, who had entered the old Prince's service forty years before and whose probity and administrative ability had brought him to a position of great power. Over the years he had husbanded the revenues of Siedmar Riedenberg with something akin to genius and he had no more liking for the excesses of the French whore than his old mistress.

"Could you not arrange a little accident, Baron?" The Princess looked at him over the tops of her spectacles.

"I don't take your meaning, Madame?"

"Do you want me to enlarge on it for you, Baron? I

presume this Mme. de Monteval goes out in a carriage occasionally, does she not?"

The Baron nodded. He was uncomfortably aware of what the old woman had in mind and his law-abiding soul was perturbed.

"I believe it is not very difficult to half-saw through an axle or remove a lynch pin, and if the carriage was going fast at the time a terrible and regrettable accident could result?"

"That could well be true, Madame."

"Well, Baron," the old woman said impatiently, "haven't I said enough? Do you need any further instructions?"

"But your Highness, that would be murder!"

"Would it? I should prefer to call it the hand of God striking down a wicked and immoral woman, who has led my son astray." Her eyes glittered evilly. "We shall be the instruments of God's will, Baron, and our reward shall be the stability of our country. You and I know just how much of our hardwon revenues are being diverted to the needs of the Prince's mistress. It is a scandal which must and will be eradicated."

The Baron shuddered. He saw the necessity for some action and it was true that other methods had failed, but murder was a barbarous solution unfitted to civilised people in the nineteenth century.

The old Princess read his thoughts and cackled. "My ancestors would not have hesitated for one moment, Baron. We have grown soft and weak. I shall expect a report on what action you have taken by next Thursday at the latest."

The Baron stood up and bowed low. The Princess put out a claw-like hand and detained him. "What money you want you shall have, within reason, Baron. We must pay well if we are to succeed without throwing suspicion on ourselves."

The Baron walked away slowly through the long ill-lit passages of the ancient castle, attended by a footman with a candelabrum, meditating as he went on the

bloody deeds which had been planned and executed here, without scruple, by the ancestors of the old Princess. He was too dutiful to disregard a direct order from the Princess but was there really no other way?

The news from a usually reliable source was true. Marie-Françoise had been furious to find herself pregnant and had tried everything she could to rid herself of the child, but without success. The Prince, however, was overjoyed, until Marie-Françoise, exasperated beyond measure by his maudlin sentimentality, said to him, "My dear Charles, I fail to see why you should be pleased at the arrival of a bastard whom you will be unable to acknowledge as a legal heir."

The prince flushed at the irrefutable French logic behind her words. His ardour was undiminished, in fact increased by the fact that his adored mistress was having his child and he longed to make her his legal wife. At the next council meeting his Ministers were horrified when he tentatively brought up the question of a morganatic marriage and the Baron, who had been wavering over the old Princess's plan, was not the only one to express concern as they left the Council Chamber in anxious groups. He now had to admit there was no other course open to them.

Marie-Françoise was oblivious of the formidable factions lined up against her. She and Sophie had formed the habit during the hot summer months of driving out to some woods on the hills above the château where they could picnic and take picturesque walks to a lovely waterfall hidden deep among the trees. Now that autumn was approaching Sophie urged her mother to make one last expedition while the weather was still fine and the trees looking their best. Marie-Françoise needed very little persuading. She had not been feeling at all well, she felt stifled by the possessiveness of her lover and she thought the fresh air and mild exercise might do her good. They set out one beautiful morning when the sun was gradually dispelling the swathes of mist along the valleys and lighting up the gorgeous reds and golds of

the turning leaves in the hills behind. Leaving their carriage by the roadside they walked slowly through the woods to the waterfall and settled down to eat their lunch on the flat rocks surrounding it, luxuriating in the peace and beauty of the scene.

After lunch Marie-Françoise looked speculatively at her daughter while she packed away their picnic things. She looked so young and happy, so pleased to have her mother to herself for once. Marie-Françoise decided she really ought to spend more time with her daughter than she did, perhaps the coming months of inactivity would provide more opportunities. She would have liked to discuss their mutual futures in terms of equality, with the one person in the world most intimately connected with her, but was held back by her desire that until Sophie was married she should remain innocent of worldly matters. She sighed deeply, feeling suddenly old and jaded and very conscious of the perceptible thickening of her slight waist.

"What is the matter, Mama, are you feeling unwell?" Sophie asked, hearing the sigh, and turning to look with concern at the dark shadows under her mother's eyes and the paleness of her face beneath the rouge.

Marie-Françoise smiled at her. "No, chérie, I was thinking about us both, and of you in particular. How would you like it if we returned to France for a few months? Suddenly I begin to feel homesick for Paris, for my own little house in the Rue de Lille, for all the sights and smells I miss so much."

"Oh, Mama, if only we could. Do you really think it possible? I long to see all my friends again."

"We must see what we can arrange, chérie." She sighed again and Sophie said, "You look tired, Mama. Close your eyes for a while, whilst I go searching for blackberries."

Sophie wandered away and Marie-Françoise leant back against a rock, shutting her eyes and lazily putting all her worries out of mind, lulled by the strong sun glancing through the leaves. When Sophie returned she

felt much refreshed. Arm in arm they went back to the carriage, to find the coachman snoring comfortably on a rug on the grass, while the footman must have wandered off into the woods, for he was nowhere to be seen. Marie-Françoise stirred the sleeping coachman with her toe and he jumped up, very abashed, explaining in slurred phrases how he had drunk too much at lunch and had laid down for only a minute because he felt so sleepy. He shouted for the footman, who came running with a capful of nuts, and together they harnessed the horses quickly and apologetically.

"We must not be late home," Marie-Françoise said to the coachman and he touched his hat obediently and whipped up the horses. The carriage swayed and lurched uncomfortably round the sharp bends in the road, but Ernst was usually a reliable driver and neither Sophie nor her mother felt any apprehension as they clutched on to the leather straps and made desultory conversation.

They were going very fast when the front nearside wheel came off with a violent juddering and the carriage tilted dangerously sideways. Sophie was thrown hard against the door, which came open and let her fall out with shocking suddenness into a clump of bushes at the side of the road. "Oh, stop the coach," Marie-Françoise was screaming. "Sophie! Sophie! are you all right?"

Ernst, swearing in a high-pitched voice, was dragging with all his strength on the reins, trying to bring the horses to a halt. Of the footman there was no sign. Before the coachman could control the horses sufficiently the whole carriage disappeared over the steep edge of the road, crashing down thunderously from rock to rock in a hubbub of shrieks, cries, splintering wood and high whinnies. Sophie, who had been bruised and badly winded, staggered to her feet after a while and peered fearfully downwards. The carriage was lying upside down at the bottom of the hill, its three wheels still spinning slowly. The coachman lay frighteningly still in a confused tangle of harness and one of the horses was trying to get to its feet, falling again and again as its legs came up

against a taut barrier of reins. Sophie could not see her mother. Catching her breath painfully and extricating her dress where it had caught on the bushes, Sophie half-climbed, half-slithered down the steep slope until she reached the shattered carriage. Marie-Françoise lay just behind it, her head lolling sideways in an unnatural position, her blue eyes staring blindly upwards. Sophie put her hand over her mouth, stifling a scream and fell on her knees beside her. She lifted her mother's head gently to lay it straight and knew by the loose heaviness that her neck was broken and she was dead.

"Oh, no," she whispered, "oh, Mama!" She looked round wildly for help. The horse had given up its struggles and lay there, its eyes wide open with a piteous stare. She caught sight of Ernst's face covered with blood, just visible round the corner of the carriage and scrambled up to see if he was alive. One of his legs was bent up at an awkward angle, but when she wiped away the blood from his face she saw that he was still breathing, though unconscious. She stood there, whimpering a little with the pain of her bruised ribs, and considered her next move. She must get help, but where? This was an unfrequented road and as far as she could remember there were not many houses in the vicinity. The sun was going down, a blood-red circle behind drifting strands of mist and it would soon be dark. There was nothing for it but to drag herself painfully up the slope again and make her way along the road until she found either habitation or people.

An hour later, gasping with weariness and shivering with cold, she was banging on the door of a farmhouse. When it was opened by the stolid fair-haired farmer she almost fell into his arms, speechless with pain and exhaustion. He picked her up and carried her into the kitchen where his wife and daughters gathered round to gaze curiously at the dark-haired girl in a torn, mud- and blood-stained muslin dress who was shaking uncontrollably. They wrapped her in a woollen blanket and gave her a hot drink and after a while she stopped

shivering and started to stammer out words over which they shook their heads, at a loss to understand her accent, which made her break into hysterical sobs.

The Prince, when he arrived punctually at the château at half-past six, was at first annoyed and then alarmed by Marie-Françoise's continued absence from home. He questioned the servants and was told of her excursion and he ordered a search party to be sent out at once. Then, growing impatient, he set out himself along the road to the high woods, accompanied by servants with torches. In the darkness they might have missed the scene of the accident altogether, had not the farmer, with whom Sophie had taken refuge, come out to enquire for what they were looking and led the Prince indoors to speak to the still hysterical Sophie. She jumped up when she saw him and threw herself into his arms, heedless of etiquette. "Oh, poor Mama, it all happened so quickly, there was nothing anyone could do. She's lying out there in the darkness, you must fetch her up the hill. And Ernst, too, he's still alive."

The Prince's face turned pale and he shouted at her, "My God, what has happened, where is your mother? You must show us at once."

"She's dead, there's nothing you can do for her," Sophie said limply and the Prince flung her off brutally and strode to the door, calling for his servants.

When they located the wreckage, Karl-August, crazed with grief, himself carried Marie-Françoise's flaccid body up the hill and laid her down by the side of the road where he crouched by her side, trying in vain to resuscitate her. To his servants' distress he refused to be parted from the dead woman and rode home in the carriage they summoned, holding her in his arms, kissing her pale face repeatedly, while his tears washed away the blood on her face. On reaching the château he took her up to her bedroom and laid her down on the enormous and elaborate gold bed with its canopy of rose silk falling from a golden crown, then flung himself down beside her and abandoned himself to an ecstasy of grief.

The frightened servants huddled outside on the landing, listening to his appalling cries, and wondering what they ought to do.

It was only when Anne-Marie and Lucie had recovered from the first shock of seeing their mistress's dead body borne in that anyone remembered Sophie. She had fainted when the Prince had thrust her aside and the bewildered farmer and his family had laid her down on a bed to await instructions. They knew now who she must be and they began to discuss whether they would get recompensed for taking her in. Two hours later Anne-Marie arrived to collect her in a carriage, berating the peasants in her rough *patois* for having done nothing to Sophie's cuts and bruises and thrusting them aside roughly when they spoke of rewards. "Out of my way," she cried, "let me take Mlle. Sophie home, the poor lamb is a mess of scratches and bruises, why should you get a reward for doing nothing?"

The old Princess was awakened at one in the morning to receive the news of Mme. de Monteval's death. She sat up in bed, a shawl round her withered neck and shoulders, a vicious smile stretching her pale lips. "And so God has smitten the evil woman. I thank Thee, Lord, for Thy mercy." And she cast her eyes upwards, laying her hands together tightly, in a horrible parody of prayer. Baron von Rednitz who had brought her the news, shivered and looked away.

"Madame, I hear the Prince is half-mad with grief and refuses to leave his mistress's body. I have despatched his physician in the hope that he may be able to calm him. The servant who brought the news says that Mlle. de Monteval was in the carriage as well, but was only bruised and shaken. The coachman was alive when they reached him, but died on the way to the château. The footman will be over the border and halfway to Austria by now."

The Princess gave him a considering glance out of half-closed eyes. "So, the daughter was with her and was

not killed. We have a danger there, I think, Baron. She is not unintelligent?"

"No, Madame, so I have heard."

"Oh dear." The Princess pulled at her lower lip. "And she is how old?"

"Fifteen or sixteen, I believe, Madame."

"And are there any relatives in France who might take an uncomfortable interest in her and her mother?"

"Her father was guillotined and his immediate relatives are all emigrés, fanatical Royalists who have joined Louis XVIII in England and refuse to go back to France until he is restored. On the mother's side there are no close relatives that we can discover. Mme. de Monteval had a sister, but she is dead and so is her husband."

"Excellent, excellent. But we are still left with the problem of this girl. We certainly don't want her to begin asking awkward questions. My son may also feel an obligation towards her, might even take her under his protection in memory of her mother. She is a pretty little thing, if I remember right."

"Indeed yes, Madame."

"Then there is only one thing to do, Baron. We must marry her off immediately, preferably to someone in another part of Germany, as far away from Siedmar Riedenberg as possible. We shall give her a large dowry and as I believe the girl is of good lineage, her father was a Vicomte, was he not? She should be a good match for someone. Have you no distant cousins, Baron, who would be suitable? Prussia is far enough away to be ideal."

"I should have to consider the matter, Madame."

"We must not waste any time, Baron. If we can present the Prince with a 'fait accompli' he will more probably be relieved than anything else. At any rate we can have the girl brought here, to the castle, where I can keep my eye on her."

Sophie was too ill from the effects of exposure and shock to be surprised at her removal to the ancient castle overlooking the town. She was attended by a comfortable

German maid who nursed her devotedly and until she was better she was not disturbed by any visitors. Then her first caller was the old Princess who, with a benevolent smile creasing her wrinkles, sat by her bedside for an hour, asking vague questions about what Sophie could remember of the accident.

Sophie, sitting propped up by pillows, her black curls tied back with a ribbon, her face still marred by unhealed scratches, had tears in her eyes when she described how they had picnicked by the waterfall.

The old Princess said, patting her hand encouragingly, "I know the place well. Go on, dear child."

Sophie continued her story, covering her face with her hands when she came to tell of the carriage plunging over the cliff in front of her helpless eyes. The Princess made soothing noises and Sophie said, rather in surprise, "I've just remembered, when the carriage went over the edge there was no sign of the footman. What could have happened to him, do you think?"

"It all happened so quickly, you must have missed seeing him in the uncertain light."

"But it was still daylight and there was no sign of him among the wreckage at the bottom of the hill. How strange! Could he have jumped off before the accident? Why didn't he come to our help?"

The Princess laid her hand on Sophie's brow. "You are feverish, child, and no wonder with these terrible sights still fresh in your mind. I have had my maid prepare you a country remedy which will take away your unhappy memories until you are stronger and more capable of contemplating them. Now that you have lost your mother, Sophie dear, I want you to look on me as your friend."

"You are very kind, Madame la Princesse. I have not thanked you enough for all you have done for me already."

"Think nothing of it, Sophie dearest, you shall be my constant care until your future is settled."

Sophie began to cry. "What will become of me,

Madame? Now I have no one in the whole world who truly belongs to me."

The old Princess put her arms round her. "Sh, dearest child, you have me, I shall be like a mother to you. You have no cause to worry about your future, I will take care of everything." She signed to her lady-in-waiting, standing in the shadows at the foot of the bed, who handed her a goblet. "Now drink this, Sophie my dear, and you will feel calmer."

"You are very kind, Madame," Sophie said, obediently draining the drink which tasted not unpleasantly of herbs. The Princess stayed by her side, holding her hand, until Sophie's eyelids began to droop. Her last sight before she gave way to overwhelming drowsiness was the old woman's eyes, which were a strange faded greenish-yellow, like a cat's, she thought.

From then on, Sophie was kept in a slightly drugged state, not unenjoyable for she felt as though she were floating just above the ground and her grief seemed somehow unreal, like something which had happened to someone else, to which one could say "How sad," and then forget. When she was allowed up once more the old Princess kept her by her side for most of the day, treating her more like a beloved granddaughter than the child of a hated enemy, but Sophie had no reason to doubt her kindness and the only people who questioned the Princess's motives were several cynics who had thought all along that the carriage accident had been suspiciously opportune. The Prince had been persuaded to recover his shattered feelings in a remote shooting box and the old Princess had taken complete charge in his absence, aided by the invaluable and discreet Baron von Rednitz.

One day when Sophie, looking touchingly frail and pretty in her mourning, was sitting with the old Princess, reading aloud to her in French, the Baron was announced.

"Madame, have I your permission to present a distant cousin of mine who has this moment arrived from Prus-

sia?" he asked, bowing as low as his aged body permitted.

"Of course, Baron, I shall be only too delighted."

Sophie stood up. "Would you like me to withdraw, Madame?"

"No, no, Sophie my dear."

The Baron turned to usher in a young man who, in spite of the elegance of his broadcloth coat with its high velvet collar, his smooth fitting white breeches and highly polished topboots, had the appearance of a shambling bear, for his neck was short and very thick, his shoulders very broad, his arms preternaturally long and his walk slow and deliberate. His hair was worn in an old-fashioned queue and his blue eyes, a very pale blue, were set close together in his florid face. He bowed rather awkwardly and kissed the Princess's hand.

"I trust you had a good journey, M. le Baron," she said in her angular French and he replied in the same language, but with an atrocious accent, "Thank you, yes, Madame."

"Allow me to present my little protégée, Mlle. de Monteval," and Sophie found her hand seized and pressed to his lips with clumsy gallantry. "*Enchanté*, Mademoiselle." He gave her a quick comprehensive stare out of the corner of his eyes which disconcerted her.

"Sophie dear, leave us now," the Princess said and Sophie curtsied gracefully and withdrew.

"Well, Herr Baron, what do you think of your prospective bride, is she not charming?" The old lady spoke in German. "She has been very carefully brought up, I can thoroughly recommend her."

"Your Highness is too kind," the young man mumbled.

"Now, Herr Baron, shall we get down to discussing the marriage settlements? I believe your uncle has all the figures we shall need. The young lady is as well-endowed with money and property as she is with charm and beauty and it only remains for you to propose to her at a suitable moment."

In the next week Sophie found that Baron von

Frankenberg was in constant attendance on the old Princess. She seemed to have taken a fancy to the young man which Sophie found strange, for he was neither witty nor particularly prepossessing. But they were thrown, perforce, into each other's company and he told her, in his appalling French, of his home on the borders of Russia and spoke of the magnificent hunting there. Sophie listened politely but with not a great deal of interest, so that when the Princess summoned her to her bedside early one morning and asked, "Do you like Baron von Frankenberg, my dear child?" Sophie replied with indifferent courtesy, "He seems a pleasant enough young man, Madame."

The Princess looked at her keenly, placing her spectacles on her nose to do so. "I know that the Baron wishes to offer for your hand, Sophie dear, and it would give me great pleasure to see you married to him."

Sophie swayed slightly and put out a hand to steady herself. "But, Madame, I am still in mourning for my mother."

"I know, dear child, but consider your situation. You have no living relatives in France and as much as I have enjoyed having you with me as my French reader, I really cannot afford another permanent lady-in-waiting. I would like to see your future settled and marriage to the Baron offers you everything you could desire."

"Madame, my dearest wish is to return to France."

"But you cannot go alone, dear Sophie, at your age you need guardians and what money would you have?"

"I have school-friends who might offer me refuge," Sophie said desperately.

The old princess shook her head sadly. "But for how long would they consent to keep under their roofs a penniless orphan, for that is what you are, Sophie dear. Your mother's sole income came from the Prince, my son, as you may have realised, perhaps."

Sophie, remembering the piles of unpaid bills in Paris, nodded her head miserably.

"There is Mama's house in the Rue de Lille."

"Mortgaged heavily. Baron von Rednitz has been going over your mother's affairs on my instructions and has reported no assets and a great many unpaid bills." The old Princess omitted to tell Sophie that the Baron had discovered, in a locked desk, a careful tally of the money deposited to Marie-Françoise's account in Paris by Talleyrand, thus giving them too late, the proof they needed of her activities as a spy.

"But," faltered Sophie, "if I have no dowry, will the Baron consent to marry me?"

The old Princess looked her straight in the eyes and lied with fluency and conviction. "The Baron is a wealthy man, my dear, and in view of your beauty and the sympathy he feels for you in your sad situation, is prepared to overlook that. I myself will give you a small token dowry so that you will not go to him empty-handed. Believe me, Sophie, I have the utmost confidence that the Baron will make you an exemplary husband, otherwise I would never have agreed to his proposal."

"Madame, I must have time to consider."

"Certainly, but do not delay too long, you are unlikely to have a better offer. The Baron comes from a very old and noble East Prussian family."

Sophie curtsied and left the room slowly. In the numbness induced by the herbal drink the Princess insisted she swallow daily her thoughts were muddled, but not too muddled to appreciate that if what the Princess said about her mother's affairs were true, she was in a truly desperate situation. Karl-August was shut away in the mountains, but even if she had been able to appeal to him, she knew he disliked her and would give her very little help. As she walked slowly along the dark winding corridors she came face to face with the old Baron, on his way to his mistress's apartments. He bowed to her politely and Sophie, on an impulse, clutched at his arm. "Please tell me, M. le Baron, is it really true that my mother has left nothing but debts?"

"I am very sorry, Mademoiselle," the old man answered in his faultless French, "but I'm afraid it is true."

Your mother was always somewhat extravagant, I believe."

Sophie had to admit the truth of that. The Baron patted her on the arm in a fatherly manner. "I am sure, Mlle. Sophie, that Her Serene Highness will do all in her power to assist you. She has a magnanimous heart."

"She has been very good to me." Sophie was desperately anxious to believe this.

"Yes indeed and you must repay her by falling in with her wishes, whatever they may be."

Sophie went on her way to the little room allotted to her in the South Tower, with weak tears welling up in her eyes. Was there really no alternative? She wished she had someone to advise her, but even Anne-Marie and Lucie, her mother's maids, were said to have gone back to France.

The Princess sent for her again a few days later, having left her to worry over her prospects until her head ached dully and she had retired to bed each night to an uneasy sleep.

"Dearest Sophie," she said when Sophie sank into a low curtsy before her, "you have had time to consider and I have sent for you so that you may have a few words with Baron von Frankenberg."

Sophie swallowed nervously, but said nothing and the Baron, who had been standing in a window embrasure with his back to them, turned and came forward slowly when the Princess called him.

"I will leave you two alone for a few minutes." The Princess's voice was tinged with meaning for them both and as they straightened themselves from their obeisances they looked at each other covertly. The Baron cleared his throat. "Her Highness has been gracious enough to give me permission to speak to you, Mlle. de Monteval. I hope that you will do me the honour of becoming my wife."

"I am sensible of the honour you do me in asking for my hand, Monsieur," Sophie said in a very low voice, so

that the Baron had to strain forward to catch her words.

"And you will marry me?" he asked doubtfully.

"I will do as Her Highness wishes," Sophie answered, with a very small sigh. The Baron took up her limp hand and kissed it with his full moist lips and while he still held it, the Princess came back, moving stiffly and majestically in her old-fashioned brocade robe.

"So, my children, the matter is concluded satisfactorily, I hope?"

The Baron bowed obsequiously. "Excellent. But come, Baron, do not be so formal with your future bride, take her in your arms."

The Baron looked from her to Sophie somewhat doubtfully and the old Princess's face cracked into a smile. "Come, Monsieur, do not be bashful." Obediently his long arms went round Sophie's frail shoulders and he pressed his damp mouth against her unresisting cheek for a moment. The Princess cackled horribly. "Let us hope that your ardour is not so restrained on your wedding night, Herr Baron. Her mother was a very passionate woman, by all accounts, so let us hope for your sake that her daughter is the same." She spoke in rapid German so that Sophie could not understand, but she saw and shuddered at the lopsided grin the Baron gave at her words.

The Princess cackled again and reverted to French. "The wedding shall take place within the next few days. Obviously it must be very quiet as Sophie is in mourning still. The castle chapel will do admirably. You may leave us now, Baron. Sophie and I will have to discuss her trousseau and the wedding arrangements."

The Baron bowed himself out of the room and the Princess turned to Sophie. "Come, dearest child, do not look so tragic. I am sure you will find the Baron a considerate husband."

M. Talleyrand had received the news of Mme. de Monteval's death ten days after the event. At first he treated it with a shrug of his shoulders. Marie-Françoise

had been useful, it was true, and he regretted the loss of such a beautiful woman, but carriage accidents were unhappily quite frequent and he had no reason to doubt the authenticity of this one. He would have set about establishing another means of getting news from that quarter, that was all. But a week later, when more detailed descriptions had reached him, he began to have doubts. He rolled them over in his mind for a week or more, for he deplored impulsive action, and at the end of that time remembered that the beautiful Mme. de Monteval had had a daughter who must be at least sixteen. What would have become of her, he wondered, and began to be vaguely bothered about his duty towards this young French girl. In the end, about six weeks after the accident, he commissioned a courier, on his way to Vienna who could easily make a detour to Riedenberg, to enquire if she needed any assistance.

The courier rode into town at dusk, weary, saddle-sore and hungry, and, after engaging a room and ordering a large meal at the best inn, enquired the whereabouts of Mlle. de Monteval. The solid burghers drinking beer from enormous china tankards exchanged glances and stifled guffaws. The Prince's French mistress had provided plenty of food for gossip while she was still alive, was her daughter to do the same? The landlord was vague. "I shall have to enquire," he said and despatched a servant to Baron von Rednitz's a few doors away with all speed.

The Frenchman was half-way through his soup with dumplings when a stooped old man of evident authority appeared in the dark dining-room and spoke to him in his own language.

"You were asking for Mlle. de Monteval?" he asked eventually, when they had exchanged lengthy courtesies. "Have you any special business with her?"

The courier, his mouth now full of the delicious veal cutlets which were the inn's speciality, said cautiously, "I understood that her mother had been killed in a tragic accident some weeks ago and I promised M. Talleyrand

to find her and see if she needed my help in returning to France."

"M. Talleyrand—yes." The old man nodded as if very impressed. "Well, I am happy to tell you that Her Serene Highness the Dowager Princess has made it her concern to take Mlle. de Monteval under her wing. Her Serene Highness has a most charitable disposition and when the poor young girl was left an orphan she at once offered her refuge in the castle here."

"Most charitable," the Frenchman said slowly and with a certain amount of scepticism, so that the Baron was put on his guard.

"Mon Dieu, I am thirsty," he said, loosening his cloak and settling himself in a chair opposite. "Have you tried some of our excellent Rhine wine, Monsieur? Perhaps you would care to join me in a bottle?"

The Frenchman nodded carelessly and took another large mouthful of veal. The old man shouted for the landlord and gave his order for wine in a loud voice, giving him at the same time a small hidden gesture with his fingers.

"And will Madame la Princesse keep Mlle. de Monteval in the castle indefinitely?"

"But no, Monsieur. The poor young girl, before her mother was killed, formed an attachment for a young relative of mine, a Baron von Frankenberg. Her Serene Highness, knowing how Mlle. de Monteval had been completely *bouleversée* by her mother's sudden and tragic death has, in the goodness of her heart, arranged for their marriage to be hurried on, in the belief that this may alleviate her sorrow."

"Most thoughtful," the Frenchman said, perhaps a shade ironically. "And when is it due to take place?"

"Tomorrow, Monsieur, in the castle chapel at eleven o'clock. Ah! here comes the wine." The landlord poured a little into a tall green glass and the Baron sipped approvingly. "Excellent, excellent. Fill up Monsieur's glass, please."

"And are guests permitted to be present?"

"Ah! that would depend on permission from Her Serene Highness, but I daresay it could be arranged if you are really anxious to see Mlle. de Monteval." The Baron's tone was questioning.

"I would like to satisfy myself that the young lady was completely happy with the arrangements made for her and whether she has any messages for M. Talleyrand in Paris."

"Of course, of course, your concern for the young lady does you credit, we all wish her well. Let me refill your glass, Monsieur, you find this wine to your liking?"

"It compares well with our own wines," the Frenchman agreed grudgingly in a slurred voice.

"Excellent. Well, as I was saying, I will see what I can arrange." The Baron stopped abruptly, a tight smile stretching his thin lips as the Frenchman's head fell forward on to the table, crushing flat the bunch of grapes he had been eating. "Herr Ober," the Baron called loudly and the man came lumbering in. "I think Monsieur here can now be removed to his bed. I rather think he will not wake until late tomorrow, and with a very thick head."

And when the courier did wake at midday, holding his splitting head carefully together, he was under the impression that the affair of Mlle. de Monteval was satisfactorily concluded and that he need not concern himself further and so he eventually reported to M. Talleyrand when he returned to Paris.

Sophie was married very quietly, in deference to her mourning, in the castle chapel the same morning with only the old Princess, her daughter and the old Baron present. After a short wedding breakfast they set off at once on their long journey to East Prussia in a new and luxurious berline which her husband had purchased in Riedenberg. They sat side by side, their arms brushing lightly against each other every now and again as the carriage swayed over the rutted roads. The weather was fine but cold and Sophie was glad of the fur-lined velvet pelisse which had been the Princess's wedding present

to her. The first hour passed in a constrained silence and then Sophie, who had been brought up to converse politely with everyone, felt that it was up to her to break the silence.

"Where shall we be spending the night, Monsieur?" she asked, turning to look at her new husband.

"We shall find rooms at the posthouse near Dresden."

"And how long will it take us to reach your home?"

"A week at least, Madame," he replied stiffly. Sophie, not very encouraged by his short abrupt answers, tried to keep the conversation going a little longer by asking about the countryside through which they were passing, but the Baron was not particularly forthcoming and after a while she lapsed into silence once more, going over in her mind the process by which she found herself tied for the rest of her life to this taciturn stranger. Her head felt clearer today than it had been for weeks and she was able to think rationally at last about her unenviable situation. She looked out of the window, her eyes filling with tears, and pondered over the steps she could have taken had her mind been less fuddled. She had never expected to be allowed to choose her own husband, but she had found herself forced into marriage far too quickly. She had no reason to doubt the old Princess's genuine and philanthropic interest in arranging her future but if only she had had time to write to her good friends in France, surely one of them would have come to her rescue and she could always have earned her living as a governess. Well, it was too late now and she would have to make the best of it, but each mile took her further away from her beloved country.

As the sun was going down in a glorious burst of scarlet they halted at the large posthouse in a small village. They were shown to their rooms by an obsequious landlady who cast awed glances at Sophie's fur-lined velvet pelisse and silk dress, which even if it were black, was fashionably cut in the latest Paris mode and made a delicious soft rustle as Sophie mounted the stairs.

"Dinner will be soon, I suppose," the Baron asked the

landlady brusquely, "mind you do not stint us. Have you everything you need, Madame?" he asked Sophie formally and she, slightly surprised to find herself addressed as 'Madame' for the first time, nodded quickly. He went through into his own chamber, which adjoined hers and closed the door. Sophie took off her outdoor things and washed her face and hands in the warm water brought by a young chambermaid, then re-did her hair. She missed the services of Anne-Marie and if only she could have had one familiar face accompanying her to her new home she would have felt less lost, but when she had asked the Princess if her mother's maids had gone beyond recall, she had been assured categorically that they had. A new maid would be found for her on her arrival in East Prussia, but until then she would have to make do with chambermaids along the route.

The Baron reappeared in an hour's time to escort her down to the dining-room of the inn where all the visitors were seated at one long table together. The Baron bowed stiffly to the other occupants, introducing himself, then took his seat. After the first course, when their sharp pangs of hunger were assuaged, conversation began to be general, but as it was in German, Sophie found it difficult to follow and she sat silently by her husband's side. The Baron ate and drank very heartily, shovelling his food in quickly and washing it down with great gulps of wine. He spoke little but when he did it was in a loud peremptory tone which the other visitors seemed not to resent. When the last course had been cleared away the men produced evil-smelling pipes and Sophie excused herself in a low voice to go upstairs alone to her bedchamber. She found the young chambermaid tidying up her room and enlisted her help in undoing her dress. The girl was disposed to chatter volubly, but her accent was so thick and incomprehensible that Sophie could only smile and nod helplessly. Once Sophie had climbed into the huge fourposter bed and made herself comfortable under the big feather eiderdown she left with a knowing

wink and a long sentence which sounded like an exhortation.

Sophie felt sleepy and snug, the bed was soft and warm like a nest of feathers, and she was dropping away easily into sleep when her husband opened the door abruptly with a heavy crash and startled her awake again. The Baron was decidedly drunk, his small close-set eyes gleamed when they fell upon Sophie blinking sleepily at him from the middle of the large bed and he stumbled over towards her, holding a candle high in one hand. He peeled the eiderdown back with the other and stood looking down on Sophie's young unviolated body which was plainly visible through the thin lawn of her nightdress, licking his lips unpleasantly. Sophie was very frightened and had no idea of what to expect. She shivered and said, "I am growing cold, Monsieur, please cover me up again."

The Baron thought this exquisitely funny. He set down the candle, kicked off his boots, dragged off his coat, shirt and trousers, laughing uproariously all the time and repeating Sophie's words, then, quite naked, he knelt on the edge of the bed and with clumsy fingers undid Sophie's nightdress until she, too, was naked. Without any warning he threw himself on her trembling body, forcing her legs apart to thrust himself deep into her. Sophie cried out in anguish and he clamped his full wet lips over hers to smother her cries. It was all over in a few moments, he rolled off and lay beside her, one heavy arm holding her down so that she could not move, but in any case she was too shocked to move. She lay there, sobbing bitterly while the Baron fell asleep, breathing heavily.

"Oh, God! he's like a wild beast," Sophie sobbed to herself. She did not dare move in case the Baron awoke and attacked her again, but the sheer exhaustion of youth made her fall asleep as suddenly as he had done. She woke again at first light, when faint stirrings in the inn itself and cock's crows and birdsong outside penetrated her consciousness. Her husband was lying

sprawled across the bed, grunting now and again, and twitching spasmodically. Sophie looked at him with horror and loathing and thought back to all the childish speculations she and her friends had indulged in on the question of marriage. How very far from the mark were their romantic theories. She tried to ease herself gently out of bed, but the Baron woke as she withdrew her arm from under his body and pinioned her down, whimpering in protest. He pulled her to him and started to kiss her, beginning with her mouth, which he forced open brutally, and going on to her breasts and small rounded stomach. Sophie was completely revolted by the feel of his thick moist mouth, like some giant slug leaving a slimy trail all over her clean body. She struggled like a frightened bird to get away, but he was too strong for her and soon he was ramming himself into her with savage disregard for anything but his own pleasure. When he had finished he lay beside her, fondling her naked body while Sophie wept quietly and hopelessly, wondering how she would ever bear this new indignity.

"Come, Madame," the Baron said at length, "dry your eyes and get dressed, we must be on the road again in an hour's time. I'll ring for the chambermaid."

The young maid came in with a sly smile flickering across her face and said something which to Sophie sounded like, "The Frau Baronin does not look as though she slept much last night," and gave a meaning laugh. And when Sophie looked in the mirror and saw her eyes, reddened by weeping, she supposed it could have looked like lack of sleep.

The Baron seemed to have had his tongue loosened by the night's pleasures. He lolled back in one corner, talking loudly in his bad French, describing to Sophie the landmarks they were passing and reminiscing about his student days in Königsberg, while Sophie answered him in monosyllables, keeping as far away from him as possible. Each night's stop saw a repetition of the first night's barbarous raping, until Sophie grew to dread the

onset of sunset and the drawing up at a posthouse. The Baron showed her not one particle of tenderness, he used her body to assuage his gross appetites, then fell asleep heavily, leaving Sophie to tremble with pain, fear and unhappiness.

On the last day of the journey they reached a dull flat countryside where signs of human habitation were few and far between. A stiff wind blew through occasional clumps of dark fir trees and stirred up the heavy sand over which the horses laboured slowly. When they stopped for a midday meal at a poor inn in the midst of nothingness they were almost choked by flying particles of the same sand, churned up by the moaning wind. The meal was poor, consisting of hunks of black bread, a sour soap-like cheese and bitter beer and Sophie was unable to swallow any of it, but the Baron ate with his usual hearty relish while the sluttish landlady and her daughter stared covertly at the fine quality of Sophie's clothes and the whiteness of her skin, muttering low comments to each other.

As darkness crept over them they came to the manor house of Frankenberg, a grim stone-built house rearing up from the monotonous gritty wastes, with not a light showing. Sophie, peering out for a first glimpse of her new home, felt her heart sink still lower. Why it looked like the prison it undoubtedly would be. But as the carriage drew up by the outer gateway and then passed over the bridge into the inner courtyard servants erupted from all sides, carrying flaming torches to light them up the steps into the big gloomy hall where a great fire was blazing in welcome. All round the walls the heads of slaughtered animals glowered down on Sophie as she warmed her hands with relief, for the wind which had been howling round them all day had held a touch of ice and snow. The Baron was shouting orders at the servants carrying in their baggage and at length he led up to Sophie a broad, flat-cheeked elderly woman in black whom he introduced as the housekeeper.

"Show the Frau Baronin her rooms, Jelka," he said

and to Sophie, "I hope you will find them comfortable, Madame. They leave much to be desired at the moment, but new furnishings are coming from Berlin shortly and you may arrange them as you wish. Jelka has found you a personal maid. If she falls short in any way let Jelka know and she shall be beaten severely."

Sophie followed the housekeeper up the staircase, ornamented with strangely carved stone animals which loomed up frighteningly in the light of the branched candlestick Jelka held aloft, and along the twisting narrow corridors to her set of connecting rooms which were not unc cosy in spite of the thickness of the walls and the smallness of the windows. The furnishings were of heavily carved oak but some attempt had been made to lighten the rooms with bright embroidered curtains and coverings. In the sitting-room was a beautifully painted spinet and a delicate gold-painted desk. Above the fireplace, illuminated by silver candlesticks, was the portrait of a woman with powdered hair and an old-fashioned panniered dress, whose lovely almond-shaped eyes looked wistfully out over the shadowy room.

"The Herr Baron's mother," Jelka said when she saw Sophie's eyes go to it.

In Sophie's bedroom, beyond the vast four-poster bed with heavy brocade curtains, was waiting her personal maid, a woman of about thirty with flaxen hair plaited round her head, high flat cheekbones and bright intelligent eyes. She curtsied very low when Sophie smiled timidly at her. "Anna," the housekeeper said shortly. "She will bring you what you need, Frau Baronin. I thought you would like dinner in your room tonight as you must be tired after your journey."

Sophie was indeed very tired after the continual travelling and the Baron's nightly assaults upon her person and Anna seemed to sense this at once. With no undue fuss she divested Sophie of her travel-stained clothes and then indicated a hip bath of warm water placed before the fire in which she washed her new mistress and then towelled her dry, massaging her tired muscles gently

until Sophie relaxed with pleasure. Finally, wrapped in a silken peignoir, she ate her supper mercifully alone by the fire, almost falling asleep after the two glasses of wine Anna persuaded her to drink. The maid spoke, when she did, in an outlandish tongue which did not seem to be German, but she anticipated Sophie's every need with great rapidity, making expressive signs which were easily interpreted. For the first time since she had left Riedenberg Sophie felt she had found someone really sympathetic and her last sight before her eyes closed with overwhelming sleepiness was Anna making sure she was warm and comfortable.

1805

THE NOONDAY sun was beating relentlessly down upon the cornfields which stretched for flat miles in every direction. Sophie was very glad of the shady inner garden which had been laid out by one of her husband's ancestors and which, in spite of the rigid formality of its paths and parterres, was a delightful oasis in the height of summer. She was stretched out on a long chair, her needlework in her hands, but the heat was making her disinclined for even that mild exertion and the distant sound of singing as the harvesters swung their scythes rhythmically in the fields, sent her thoughts back to her first arrival here and the long cold bitter winter which had followed, when it had seemed impossible that its icy grip would ever relax and the sun shine again. By candlelight the house had seemed mysterious and rambling, but daylight had revealed its true nature, rambling, bleak and dilapidated. Everything, although scrupulously clean, was faded

and neglected, the carpets worn threadbare, the curtains almost falling apart when they were pulled, the large library's ceiling-high shelves practically denuded of books, the springs gone and the brocade patched in the upholstered chairs. Sophie had been taken aback when the housekeeper had shown her round, it looked as though no money had been spent on it for a long time, even as though whatever there was of value had been sold, for there were faded patches on the striped wall coverings where pictures had once hung. This was not the home of a rich man, or if it were, of one who was too mean or avaricious to afford the necessary replacements, which Sophie had no reason to believe was true of her husband, who had spent lavishly on their journey north.

The Baron met them when they finished their tour and said loudly, to conceal his mortification, "As you have no doubt seen for yourself, Madame, the house needs refurnishing. You may order whatever you wish from Berlin to set the place in order." Even then Sophie did not realise the true state of her husband's finances before he had married her. He was the lord of scores of acres and had the power of life and death over countless serfs, yet to travel to Berlin or Riedenberg in the style befitting his rank meant that he had to sell pictures, books or silver to finance the journey. In her innocence Sophie believed that the absence of a mistress in the household had meant that her husband had let everything fall to pieces around him because he did not care, not pausing to consider that years and years of neglect had contributed to its present state.

Although the Baron had continued to attack Sophie's body regularly like an insensitive animal, and with no more gentle preliminaries than an animal, he was not insensible of the efforts she made with the help of Jelka and the innumerable maids, to make the house more habitable and every now and again would make clumsy efforts to show his gratitude. But he was unused to the company of women, having been sent whilst still very young to cadet school and then on to university and there

was absolutely no common ground between them. He never read anything other than a newspaper, he found it hard to compose the simplest letter and he had no idea of conversation apart from loud dogmatic statements about any subject Sophie raised, whether he knew anything about it or not. He was erratic about his personal cleanliness. He spent the short daylight hours slaughtering animals or riding round the estate supervising his serfs with bullying inefficiency. But in wintertime darkness came at three o'clock in the afternoon and he had no better way to occupy his time than to eat and drink enormously and stretch out in his armchair by the fire, yawning prodigiously, and playing with his dogs. Sometimes he would send for Sophie to play and sing to him on the piano he had ordered for her in one of his fits of magnanimity.

Sophie had wept herself to sleep for weeks after her arrival. Each morning she had wakened with a sinking heart to face a new day which could hold nothing for her of either pleasure or happiness and, when the sickness of early pregnancy had been added as well, she had often prayed for death to release her and re-unite her with her mother. The silent but discerning Anna had been her one comfort. Her large eyes were eloquent with sympathy as she supported her young mistress on the mornings when she retched uncontrollably before she could face her breakfast. Or she would help her to bathe before the fire, massaging her aching muscles, tense with aversion after a night spent with her husband. Anna was a Pole, despised by the East Prussians as a lesser being, who had been married to one of the serfs but lost him a year before in an accident, and to Sophie she became a true friend.

Once the Baron knew that Sophie was to have a child he treated her with rather more consideration and was sparing in his attentions, for which she was very thankful. She took no pleasure herself in the thought of the coming baby, conceived in pain and revulsion, and

perhaps because of this she suffered greatly in the first four months.

All during the winter months Sophie and her husband were condemned to exist alone together, with no outside company, but as soon as the thaw started and while the roads were still almost impassable with mud, their neighbours came to call, curious to inspect the Baron's young French bride. As they all lived more than a day's journey away their visits lasted for several days at a time. But although Sophie found the men gross and dull like her husband and the women plump 'hausfraus' with no thoughts beyond their households and children, at least they provided company of a sort and a change from the interminable dull meals taken alone with the Baron. Her husband became quite jovial during these visits, showing Sophie off with awkward pride, making coarse jokes with his fellow landowners and their wives and pinching the red cheeks of their bovine, heavy-breasted, broad-hipped daughters. Sophie, watching him, thought he would have been far happier married to one of them, their placidity would hardly have been ruffled by his brutal lovemaking.

Sophie was looked upon with great awe, firstly for her slim elegance and grace which made her look delicate and fragile next to these stolid, slow-moving country gentry; secondly for having come from Paris, an almost legendary city of fashion and culture to these East Prussians who, whatever other aspect of their education was neglected, were always taught to speak French in their youth, for it was regarded as an essential language for ladies and gentlemen of birth and breeding. The women gaped at her dresses and asked her avidly for news of the latest fashions. The whole company, when they learnt she had actually met Bonaparte and his wife, now newly-proclaimed Emperor and Empress, questioned her endlessly on her impressions and expected her to be well-informed on the latest news from France. The French Emperor and his armies were somewhat of a bogey to them, for there seemed to be no end to his conquests

and annexations, and he had never yet lost a battle. They were relieved that at the moment he was concentrating on the invasion of England, for French occupation troops were stationed in nearby states and one never knew whether they might decide to march into Prussia as well.

None of these neighbours were rich, except in land and serfs, and when they returned their visits Sophie found that their homes were as ramshackle as the Baron's had once been before the improvements, but they all lived comfortably enough on the produce of their estates.

There was really no more common ground between her and these neighbours than there was between her and her husband and, to someone who had been brought up in the principles of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' the whole idea of owning peasants body and soul was abhorrent. The serfs could do nothing without their masters' permission, and they seemed to care little about the wretched conditions in which they lived and worked. Sophie's occasional objections were treated with dispassionate and scornful shrugs, what had been good enough for centuries was not to be tampered with now that revolutionary ideas were abroad.

There was a sudden stir in the drawing-room which led on to the inner garden and out through the open doors came her husband and a tall young man in military uniform, who inspected Sophie with eyes as blue as a calm summer sea.

"Madame, may I present my brother who has arrived unexpectedly to spend some time with us," the Baron said. Sophie gave him her hand and he bent over it gracefully. The Baron had spoken of his younger brother, Friedrich, who was an officer in the King's Guards in Berlin, but up to now Sophie had not met him. She looked at him curiously. He was tall and very slim, quite unlike his elder brother, and his magnificent shoulders were well set off by his impeccably cut uniform jacket with its high collar and gold epaulettes. His very blue

eyes were exactly like the eyes of his mother in the portrait in her sitting-room.

"Madame, I had no idea my brother's wife was so exquisite or I would have paid my first visit earlier. You must forgive my neglect in not coming before to pay my respects." His French, though accented, was more elegant than the Baron's. He looked at Sophie with frank admiration and Sophie found herself blushing under his scrutiny.

"Have you eaten yet, Monsieur? Shall I order a meal for you?"

"I ate atrociously along the road, Madame. What I should really like is a glass of wine, in which I hope you will join me. I must really drink a toast to my new and very beautiful sister."

The Baron stood by uneasily during this exchange, glowering at the easy compliments which came so smoothly from his handsome brother. He clapped his hands with loud suddenness and a servant appeared, waiting patiently for his wishes to be known.

"Would you care for some Chambertin, Monsieur?" Sophie asked. "Or do you prefer Rhine wine?"

"I defer to your superior taste, Madame. After seeing you I am ready to believe that not everything which comes out of France can be bad. In women and wine she excels."

"The Chambertin then, Helmut, and bring more chairs, please."

Friedrich seated himself close to Sophie when the chairs came and began to tell her about his journey, making her laugh with his descriptions of the mishaps which had befallen him on the way. The Baron placed his chair close beside Sophie on the other side and watched her and his brother with suspicious little eyes. He had never been able to make Sophie laugh like this and he grew increasingly jealous as he saw how well they were getting on with each other. Sophie looked enchanting in her light summer dress with her dark hair dressed in loose curls held back by a blue ribbon and

her slender ankles crossed to show delicate bronze slippers. Her lovely big eyes with their long dark lashes were alight with amusement as Friedrich prattled gaily on and her extreme youthfulness made her swollen stomach slightly incongruous.

The Baron found slow anger rising up to choke him at the springing up of this quick intimacy between them. He said abruptly, "You are looking tired, Madame. As we are expecting company to dinner would it not be better to have a rest?"

Sophie turned to look at him reproachfully. "But I have been resting. I find your brother's conversation too stimulating to forgo. Am I to cut short our first encounter so soon?"

"Pay no attention to Ludwig. He has always been jealous of me. He pictures me carrying you off with me to Berlin for the winter. Should you not like that, my dear Sophie?" And he raised her hand to his lips and smiled intimately into her eyes.

Sophie smiled back at him, slightly wary. "And would I enjoy Berlin, Monsieur? Berlin is not Paris, I fear."

"It may not be Paris, but anything is preferable to spending the winter shut up alone with Ludwig in this bare prison, though from what I have seen you have been busy making it more habitable since I was last here. New curtains, carpets and coverings everywhere, you must have come into a fortune, Ludwig. And actually something to drink other than schnapps or beer." He raised his wineglass mockingly to his brother, who hunched his head forward like an angry bull. "Come, Ludwig, with a beautiful wife like this you should not keep her hidden in the country. You can afford now to rent a house in Berlin for the winter and present yourselves at Court. I promise you you will have plenty of admirers, Madame, and we can always distract your husband's attention with some buxom maid-of-honour if he proves too possessive."

The Baron gave an angry exclamation and stood up, pushing his chair away so violently that it almost splin-

tered. "That is enough, Friedrich. Madame, I insist that you rest before dinner."

Friedrich laughed provokingly and gave his hand to Sophie to help her up and would have escorted her into the house on his arm, had not the Baron elbowed him out of the way roughly, growling, "She can manage without you."

"Where are your manners, my dear brother?" Friedrich said evenly, but his blue eyes glinted and he laid his hand on his sword. Sophie, glancing from one to the other nervously, said, "I will see you at dinner, Messieurs," and walked away carefully into the house. Surprisingly enough she felt suddenly sorry for her husband, whose slow wits were obviously no complement to his brother's, but Friedrich's gaiety made a welcome break in her dull existence and she looked forward to the evening and more lively conversation over the dinner table than was usual.

Her excitement revealed itself while she was dressing and Anna glanced at her in the mirror with a motherly smile. "Handsome man, you must look beautiful," she said in their *lingua franca*, a mixture of Polish, French and German words at which they were getting quite adept. Sophie smiled back. "Handsome, but dangerous, there will be arguments if I'm not careful."

"In old days, many fights between brothers, the Mama very unhappy."

"Which one did she prefer?" Sophie asked, trying the effect of some earrings and knowing the answer already.

"The younger, he have good looks and spirit like the Mama, the other like father, like angry bull," and Anna hunched her neck into her shoulders in an exact imitation of the Baron which made Sophie smile.

"There," she said, standing up and examining herself in the glass critically. In spite of the advanced state of her pregnancy Sophie looked prettier than she had ever looked before, for her face had grown rounder and softer and she had lost the anxious frown which had so often disfigured her in the past.

Their visitors, who were driving over to spend several days, consisted of a father and mother, two sons and three daughters of Sophie's age and as Sophie descended the main staircase their carriage had just driven up. The young people had ridden over and been met half-way by the Baron and his brother, which explained the extreme animation displayed by the girls as they waited for the handsome Friedrich to assist them from their mounts. Frau von Kenten gave Sophie a motherly embrace and held her off at arm's length. "You are looking extremely well, dear Madame, and I should judge by the way you are carrying that you will have a boy."

"My husband will be pleased then," Sophie replied, "he does not expect me to give him anything else." The Baron, watching and listening, gave an approving nod and Sophie curled her lips derisively. If he had his son he might leave her alone for a time.

Friedrich was escorting the girls in gallantly and their mother looked on approvingly, whispering to Sophie, "We were so pleased to see dear Friedrich again. He's so good-looking and it's high time he chose a bride, which one of my girls do you think he might favour?"

Sophie said politely, "They are all so charming, Madame," and glanced over at her brother-in-law, sandwiched between the three heavy, red-cheeked, stolid country girls who were giggling delightedly at his compliments. He gave her a wicked flick of an eyelid and she turned away with a slight smile to lead her guests to their rooms.

Dinner that evening was positively gay. The windows stood open to let in the scent of flowers from outside and the candles flickered in the light breeze which had sprung up. The servants in their white gloves moved round silently and smoothly, bringing fresh courses and replenishing empty glasses. Sophie responded with liveliness to Friedrich's witty domination of the conversation at her end of the table, which made a pleasant change from the usual slow question and answer technique she was forced to employ to keep things moving. At the

other end of the table the Baron and the younger von Kentens, drinking enormously with no apparent effect, were arguing loudly about the desirability of Prussia joining Russia, Austria and England in a new coalition against the French.

"What do they say in Berlin, Friedrich?" the father asked.

"Why, that we should fight the French before they annex Prussia as they have already annexed Hanover. We are slowly being encircled, with the Confederation of the Rhine and talk of a Kingdom of Poland."

"But if they should offer us Hanover, as I have heard it whispered," one of the sons called from the other end of the table.

"Bonaparte is playing a double game. Rumour in Berlin has it that he has offered Hanover to England as well."

"So you take the part of the Queen, Prince Louis and the Duke of Brunswick?"

"As should any true Prussian. Is our army inferior to the French army? Why, our cavalry is acknowledged to be the best in the world. It's time someone broke the myth of the invincibility of the French."

"We should lose all our young men to the army," grumbled the Baron, "if war should come, and this year we shall have a good harvest. Pray heaven that Bonaparte goes ahead with his invasion of England and leaves us alone."

"You would rather save your own thick skin and get your harvest in than see your country's good name dishonoured, Ludwig?" Friedrich asked contemptuously.

"We're not foolish young hotheads like the King's Guard in Berlin, Friedrich," Herr von Kenten said pacifically. "Let the English pour out their gold to the Austrians and Russians and let them get on with the business of defeating the French."

"Whilst we keep our swords sheathed and hear the Austrians and Russians call us cowards!"

Sophie could see her husband's shoulders beginning

to hump forward ominously and his neck turn red and she caught Friedrich's eye appealingly. Not knowing quite how to change the subject which was causing everyone's temper to rise, she said the first thing that came into her head. "And is the Queen as beautiful as I have heard, Friedrich?"

"Why, yes, my dear Sophie," he said turning to her, "though now I have met you I can truthfully say she is not the most beautiful woman in all Prussia." And he smiled into her eyes and raised his glass to her, which threw her into confusion. She had merely been trying to divert the conversation into less dangerous channels, not to seek embarrassing compliments which would only anger her husband more. She looked at Friedrich reproachfully and he, quick to take her meaning, started on a long and amusing story about the Court, which interested the women and left the Baron and the young von Kentens free to go on arguing in subdued voices at the other end of the table.

When dinner was ended Friedrich suggested they should dance and Frau von Kenten, without much demur, was seated at the piano to play for them. The Baron, far too large and clumsy to be any good at dancing, sat in a corner with Herr von Kenten, where they puffed at their pipes and talked about farming.

After a country dance Friedrich insisted that Sophie should dance the waltz with him, which gave them the opportunity for more intimate conversation.

"To think that I dreaded coming to meet my brother's bride and nearly put it off altogether. I wish, now, I had forestalled my brother and married you myself."

"You arrived on the scene too late, Monsieur," Sophie said with a smile.

"Alas! but that need not prevent us from becoming better acquainted, especially if you do as I suggest and come to Berlin this winter."

"I am afraid my husband will need a lot of persuasion."

"You underestimate yourself, Madame, I should have

thought you would have no difficulty in persuading him. A few appealing glances from those beautiful dark eyes and even his hard heart would be melted."

"I have not found him very susceptible to appealing glances," Sophie replied with a scornful look at her husband which was not lost on Friedrich.

"Ludwig is too used to commanding his serfs, he has no finesse when it comes to anything else. Come to Berlin, dear Sophie, and I promise you you will be vastly amused."

"Will you undertake my amusement personally, Monsieur?" Sophie asked, with her eyes sparkling. It had been so long since she had received such polished compliments that she could not help responding with a trace of coquetry.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, as you very well know, my dear Sophie." And he tightened his hold on her.

"Sophie," the Baron hissed suddenly as they passed in front of him, "you have danced too long, you will over-tire yourself."

"Surely, Ludwig, Sophie is capable of deciding for herself whether she is tired or not. Are you tired, Sophie?"

"No—no," Sophie stammered.

The Baron stood up, glowering at his wife and brother ferociously. "You are neglecting our guests, Madame. I order you to stop dancing."

"And I say we have not finished our dance." Friedrich held Sophie in his arms firmly and she, glancing uncomfortably from one brother to the other, wished she could get free. They seemed oblivious of the quick glances the others were casting in their direction.

"Perhaps I am rather tired," she said.

"Let her go," the Baron said thickly to Friedrich, the veins dilating in his massive neck.

"Only when we have finished our dance."

"Oh, please," Sophie pleaded, "let me go, please, Monsieur."

They had ceased to be aware of her, however, and were completely absorbed in their own animosity.

"Out of my way, you uncouth bear."

"Let my wife alone, do you hear?"

The situation was saved by Frau von Kenten who stood up from her seat at the piano, saying in a loud voice of forced affability, "I am rather tired of playing, my dear Baron, shall we have a game of cards?"

"That is a good idea," Sophie cried with relief. "Do you hear, Messieurs, Mme. von Kenten would like a hand of cards?"

Friedrich was the first to be roused. Smiling scornfully at the Baron he led Sophie across the room to the others, saying smoothly, "A game of cards would be delightful."

Sophie seated herself at the card table as far away from Friedrich as possible. The Baron, after having mastered his rage with an effort, joined them, dealing out the cards with thick clumsy fingers. While they were examining their hands Frau von Kenten whispered to Sophie, "They used to quarrel dreadfully as children, they have apparently not grown out of it. They will soon calm down."

"I sincerely hope so," Sophie whispered back. "I am grateful to you, Madame, for interrupting them."

"Men never really grow up," she answered comfortably. "You will soon learn how to handle them."

Whilst Sophie was getting ready for bed later that evening her husband came in wearing his brocaded dressing-gown. "A fine exhibition you made of yourself tonight, Madame," he began in a slurred voice, flicking his fingers imperiously at Anna to leave them alone.

Sophie looked at him in the mirror and, deciding he was very drunk, did not answer. She knew only too well to what she owed this visit, the Baron felt his possession of her threatened by his handsome brother. "Let him be quick," she prayed silently. But the Baron was not disposed to be expeditious tonight. He picked Sophie up in his long arms and carried her limp body to the great double bed where he threw back her nightdress

and slowly kissed her full blue-veined breasts with his loose flabby lips. Then he passed his hand caressingly over her well-rounded stomach, grunting with pleasure as he felt the movements of the child within her.

"You belong to me, do you understand?" he said finally, "to me," and he thrust himself into her with all his accustomed ruthlessness. When it was all over Sophie lay beside him, shivering from the ordeal, to which, try as she might, she could never accustom herself and which each time made her hate her husband more.

The next day passed without any unpleasant incidents. The antipathy between the brothers was still marked but fortunately never came to a head. On the final day of the von Kentens' stay the Baron and Sophie took their guests for a picnic in the beautiful woods which were part of the estate. It was a lovely day and Sophie who, during the bleak winter months, had looked despairingly from the manor house windows at flat snow-laden fields and beyond to the bare, leafless snow-laden branches of the forest, had never ceased to be astonished by the beauty which had unfolded once spring had come. She could never tire of driving deep into the woods, which were full of flowers and the delicate variegated greens of chestnuts, birches and firs. In the middle of the forest was a lake and here on the banks the servants set out their picnic. After the company had eaten and drunk with their usual hearty appetites, the girls and their brothers elected to go rowing on the lake with the Baron, who wished to inspect the fishing on the further side. This left the elder von Kentens, Sophie and Friedrich sitting on the rugs spread out on the grass. At first their conversation was quite animated, but as the sun grew hotter, first the husband, and then the wife, satiated with food and drink, fell into a heavy doze. Sophie looked at Friedrich, lying lazily back with his hands behind his head and laughed as they began to snore lightly. "Do you feel like falling asleep, too?" she asked. "I thought I might go for a short walk in the woods."

"I'll come with you," Friedrich answered, springing up in one lithe movement and giving her a helping hand. They set off down one of the long sandy rides, walking slowly side by side, talking in a lighthearted way about the wood, which Friedrich knew well, and the von Kentens and the other people round about. Friedrich was very amusing in rather a cruel way and Sophie's laughter came readily, giving her face a light and happiness which Friedrich regarded with pleasure.

They had walked quite a way into the wood when they found themselves in a secluded dell covered with young and tender bracken. "This was one of my secret hiding places as a child," Friedrich said, "shall we rest here awhile? I don't want to overtire you. See, if I spread out my coat on the bracken you will be quite comfortable."

He saw her settled, then lay down beside her, gazing up dreamily through the branches at the very blue sky above, the same colour, almost, as his own brilliant eyes. Sophie, twisting the stems of the bracken idly, watched him curiously.

"You look remarkably like your mother," she said at last. "You remember that picture of her which is in my sitting-room?"

Friedrich veiled his eyes and set his full lips together firmly. "Ah, she was beautiful, my mother, and like you she loved coming to the forest in summer. She used to bring me with her when I was young and we would spend all day here, talking together. She would often tell me she would like to be buried here, here in the woods where she had spent so many happy hours."

Sophie remained silent. Friedrich's face wore a look totally alien to his gay mood of a quarter of an hour ago, sentimental and sad, and she hesitated to interrupt his thoughts.

"And when she did die," Friedrich went on quietly, "it was in the midst of winter and I was far away, too far to persuade my father to respect her wishes. In any case he would have regarded it as pagan sacrilege for her to

lie in the woods, in unhallowed ground. He never understood her."

"How old were you when she died?" Sophie asked softly after a long interval of silence.

"I was sixteen and a cadet in the army, but I wept like a baby when I heard the news. Up to now I have never met a woman who measured up to my mother for beauty, kindness and intelligence. That is," he said sitting up abruptly and throwing off his pensive frame of mind like a cloak, "until I met you." He put his arm round Sophie's waist and his face close to her cheek, then placed a light kiss on the swelling curve of her breasts, just visible above the low neck of her muslin dress. "Sophie, you're too lovely to belong to that brute who calls himself my brother."

Sophie flinched and stiffened her body at once. "Please take your hand away, Monsieur," she said in a low voice.

"Why, what is the matter, my dear Sophie? Surely you have no scruples about deceiving that oaf, he's far too stupid to deserve you. My dearest Sophie, we could make each other very happy." And he caressed her body boldly.

Sophie was trembling violently. "Monsieur, let me alone, do you understand, or I will be forced to scream for assistance."

Friedrich looked at her in astonishment. "You cannot be serious? Why, you have encouraged me in every possible way since we first met."

"You are mistaken, Monsieur." She managed to free herself and stood up, her legs shaking, her face white and terrified. Friedrich remained on the ground, gazing up at her with a quizzical smile.

"I fail to understand your sudden change of mood, my dear Sophie. It surely cannot be an excess of outraged wifely virtue?"

"I *am* married to your brother, Monsieur. I should have thought respect for your family honour would have prevented you from making love to his wife."

Friedrich's face darkened. "What is my brother to me, I loathe and detest him and I could have sworn that you do, too, my dear Sophie. Who are you anyway to refuse my caresses, the daughter of a French whore, the mistress of Prince Karl-August, who bled him white with her extravagances and had to be murdered to get her out of the way."

"That's not true," Sophie whispered, looking at him with horror. "It was an accident, a pure accident."

"No?" he shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "Perhaps I am mistaken, I'm only repeating rumours."

"It's not true." But even as she repeated the words she relived those terrible moments, the sound of splintering wood, the sight of her mother's ghastly lolling head, the tangle of broken wreckage scattered over the hillside and knew that it might well be true. She shuddered, if her mother had not been killed she would not now be standing in a sunlit East Prussian wood, married to a man she detested, weighed down by his unwanted child. She gave a muffled sob and started walking slowly and blindly away towards the lake. Friedrich jumped up and followed her. "Sophie, stop. Stophie, I didn't mean to make you cry."

He caught her by her shoulders and turned her round to face him. The tears were running down her cheeks, making her look like the bewildered and unhappy child she was. Friedrich took out a handkerchief and wiped her tears away carefully. "Come, Sophie, let me comfort you, I can't bear to see you so unhappy."

"Leave me alone, Monsieur, leave me alone, I beg of you." And Sophie pushed him away violently, catching him off balance so that he staggered back. She held up her skirt and ran awkwardly on, but Friedrich, infuriated by her repulse, caught her up easily and took hold of her arm roughly.

"You don't escape me so easily, Madame. You have teased and tantalised me enough and now I mean to have my reward." He took her in his arms and kissed her lingeringly on the lips, gradually forcing her mouth open

and pushing in his tongue. Sophie struggled in vain, he was too strong for her, she felt dizziness overtaking her rapidly and Friedrich, relinquishing her mouth at last, found she had fainted in his arms. Half-cursing, half-laughing, he picked her up and carried her back to the lakeside and laid her down on a rug, where she came round to find Frau von Kenten bending over her solicitously. "Are you all right, my dear child? Friedrich said you were overcome by the heat. I had better take you back to the house at once in the carriage. I'm afraid that the energy you have put into entertaining us so delightfully has exhausted you and you cannot be too careful now that your time is so near."

"Yes, I should like to return to the house," Sophie agreed faintly.

"I will accompany you," Friedrich said, standing over her with his legs straddled arrogantly. "There is no need for Frau von Kenten to cut short her excursion."

Sophie shuddered and fortunately the older woman, misinterpreting her movement, said quickly, "Come, Friedrich, don't stand there gawking, order them to harness the horses quickly. Now, don't worry, my dear child, you are quite safe in my hands, after all I have not had six children for nothing. Let me help you up."

After she had rested Sophie felt able to come down to dinner, but she was not sorry when her pale face prompted Frau von Kenten to suggest an early night after an hour or two of music. The von Kentens left next morning and Friedrich, after spending another day with them, during which the atmosphere grew more and more tense, announced that he was expected by some friends and had to leave. He deliberately made a great ceremony of his farewell, overwhelming Sophie with fulsome compliments and kissing her hand repeatedly, whilst the Baron, dark red with suppressed rage, waited impatiently for him to go. At last he was off, springing lightly on to his horse and galloping off with exaggerated expertise, followed by his servants.

"We shall have no more visitors now until after the child is born," the Baron growled to Sophie. "The excitement is not good for you, we want no more mishaps like your fainting on the picnic."

Sophie looked at him and thought, if I told him what had caused my faint then, would he die of apoplexy? Aloud she said, "Very well, Monsieur."

Four weeks later Sophie was awakened in the middle of the night by what she thought was indigestion. She endured it for a while, shifting her position constantly in an effort to get comfortable, but nothing answered and finally she slipped out of bed and paced restlessly to and fro, very conscious of the dull pain low down in her back, looking out of her window occasionally at the rising sun above the forest, where the leaves were just on the verge of changing colour. When Anna came in quietly at eight to see if she were awake, she cried out at the sight of her mistress clutching her arms defensively over her distended stomach. "Why you not call me, Frau Baronin? How long you have pains?"

Sophie surrendered herself thankfully to Anna's administrations. She helped her on to the bed and massaged her aching back gently, murmuring to her encouragingly as the pain rose and fell. When she did not come downstairs the Baron sent a message to ask if she were all right and on hearing she was in labour, appeared at her bedside, looking down at her with his shoulders hunched characteristically. He put a clumsy hand on her forehead, which was damp with sweat and said with a tinge of embarrassment, "Are you suffering greatly, Sophie?"

"No—no," she answered uncertainly, uncomfortable to have him there and wishing he would go away. She was seized suddenly with a fiercer convulsion than she had yet felt and writhed away from his touch. The Baron said hastily, "Courage, Madame, the midwife has been sent for," patted her awkwardly on her shoulder and left.

As the hours slowly passed Sophie's slender body was shaken by gripping crescendos of pain which gave her

very little respite. The day was stifflingly hot and, although the small windows were open wide, hardly any air circulated in the room until Sophie felt she would suffocate. Anna untiredly wiped the sweat away from her face and body and put cool wet cloths on her hot forehead. Sophie clutched despairingly at her gentle hands during the worst bouts of pain and Anna spoke to her softly and comfortingly in Polish, urging her to push hard. When the baby was finally born twenty-four hours later Sophie was too spent to do more than close her eyes, thankful that the unending spasms had at last ceased. She lay back on her pillows and breathed quietly and slowly, just aware of faint cries and of Anna telling her it was a girl.

"A girl," she murmured uncomprehendingly and drifted away into sleep. She was woken with a start. Her husband was standing by the bedside once more, speaking to her gruffly in his abominable French.

"Are you all right, Sophie? It is a pity it was only a girl after all that. We must hope that the next one will be a boy."

Sophie stared up at him, her dark eyes big with remembered pain. She had been through all that agony only to have him remind her that it would soon start all over again, his humiliating assaults, her early sickness, the ugly swelling of her slight body, the grinding pain of the actual birth. It was too much, she felt weak tears sliding down her cheeks and said between clenched teeth, "Am I to be allowed no peace?"

The Baron looked uncomfortable. Even he could sense the bitterness behind her words at that moment and he realised dimly that he had been *maladroit*. "The child is very fine, Sophie. She looks like you. What do you wish to call her?"

Sophie turned her back on him and buried her face in the pillow and the Baron, after looking down on her with perplexity, gave a final glance at the child in the midwife's arms and shambled out of the room.

Anna, having bathed the child and wrapped her closely

in a shawl, brought her over to the bed. "Is fine little one," she said coaxingly to Sophie.

"Go away," Sophie said in a muffled voice, "I don't want to see her."

"One small look, Frau Baronin, only one small look."

Sophie rolled over unwillingly and Anna put the baby in her arms. She felt deliciously soft and warm and made little mewling sounds like a kitten, her mouth opening and shutting blindly. Sophie lay there, holding her tightly, and began to examine her carefully. She was struck first of all by the miniature eyelashes, already long and curling, then by the soft black down on her head and the tiny perfectly formed ears. "She's sweet," she said shakily to Anna, who nodded and smiled at her. "Is pretty, is like Mama."

"My little darling," Sophie said softly to the baby, kissing her on the top of her head. "What shall we call you?"

The Baron had already announced to her what the child's names were to be if it had been a boy, but he had refused to discuss the possibility of it being a girl and Sophie herself had not cared enough to give it any thought. Now she looked down at her daughter with amazed love and said, "I think she looks like a Juliette, Juliette Marie-Françoise."

1806

"It is to be war then," the Baron said to Sophie, "the King has let himself be carried away by the Queen, Prince Louis and the army at last. Your fine Bonaparte has refused to withdraw his troops from Germany

unless Prussia disarms and the King declares that this is impossible. Friedrich will be overjoyed. Your countrymen are taking on more than they bargain for when they challenge the army of the Great Friedrich. Perhaps we shall see Frenchmen running away at last!"

They had been sitting out in the inner courtyard in the early September sun when a messenger had arrived from Berlin with a packet of letters and newspapers. "The Russians and Austrians were decisively beaten by the French Army at Austerlitz last year," Sophie replied stiffly, "and they were certain enough of victory before the battle."

"Pah! the Russians and Austrians were soundly trounced by our Great Friedrich in the past. I tell you, your precious Bonaparte does not realise what he is up against this time. We will drive him out of Germany once and for all."

Sophie picked up Juliette who, taking her first tottering steps had just fallen and bumped herself. "There, my precious, don't cry, Mama will kiss the place better. Where will the battles take place, Ludwig, shall we be safe here?"

The Baron gave a grunt of laughter. "Safe enough. The only Frenchmen you will see, Madame, are prisoners of war. The army will make for Weimar to join up with the King of Saxony's men. If we win then, by God, I shall take you to Berlin for the winter as Friedrich is always demanding and you shall see how we can celebrate."

Sophie gave him a sidelong glance of distaste for his boasting and stood up with Juliette in her arms. She was six months pregnant with her second child and looked tired and pale in the strong sunlight.

"Here, let me carry the child," her husband said brusquely, taking Juliette from her and throwing her up in the air exuberantly. He was rough and clumsy with his daughter, roaring at her suddenly and loudly or throwing her about violently and Juliette was always apprehensive in his presence, but Sophie, who had thought that as she was a girl he would ignore her completely,

found his blundering attempts to play with her and win her love slightly pathetic and rather touching. Juliette was an attractive child, small and slight with very fair hair and brilliant blue eyes which already showed signs of quick intelligence. Sophie thought her perfection itself and could not find fault with her husband for his clumsy overtures, it even formed a tenuous bond between them.

The whole of September was alive with rumours. Neighbours came and went excitedly with news and speculation, those of them with sons or brothers in the army eager to give the latest information from their letters. By the beginning of October the Prussian armies were reported to be massing between Eisenach and Jena, near Weimar, and there had at last been a formal declaration of war. Everyone was confident that at last Napoleon would be defeated and comforting statistics were produced to support these hopes, with equally comforting stories of demoralisation amongst the French and bitter quarrels between the marshals. Sophie listened to all this silently and with a certain amount of alarm. She could never consider herself a completely loyal supporter of the French Emperor, but she had rejoiced at the end of the previous year when the French had defeated the Austrians and Russians so magnificently at Austerlitz. She had thought then that her husband's country would become allied to the French, but anger at the Emperor's high-handed measures had mounted steadily throughout 1806 and at last Friedrich William had been forced into hostilities by the war party in Berlin, backed up by promises of help from his Russian allies.

Everyone was so certain of victory that the news of the crushing defeat of Jena and Auerstadt on October 14th struck blind terror into the neighbourhood and, at first, was scarcely credited. Then came reports of French cavalry scouring through the countryside in search of the fleeing remnants of the Prussian army and the flight of the King, Queen and the Court to Königsberg which turned blind terror into panic. The Baron came into

Sophie's room early one morning before the mists had lifted to reveal the sun and whilst she was still in bed. "Get dressed at once, Madame, pack what is absolutely essential for you and the child, we leave for Königsberg in an hour's time." His face was pale and sweating and his hands were trembling visibly.

Sophie looked at him with astonishment. "But why? Surely we shall be just as safe here?"

"Do not argue with me, Madame, I tell you we are leaving. The French are looting everything, no one is safe, they will be here in a few hours, I have heard from the von Kentens."

"You forget, Monsieur, that I am French myself, why should I run away?"

The Baron was furious, he advanced on her and pulled the bedclothes off savagely. "Get up, get up at once. Anna, tell the nurse to get the child dressed. I expect you downstairs in less than an hour, Madame, otherwise I leave with the child alone."

Sophie, thoroughly disconcerted by her husband's obvious panic, got out of bed and dressed hurriedly, then went to supervise Juliette's dressing. Anna was thrusting clothes into valises in a hurried way ready for the Baron's manservant to carry away and finally they went downstairs to find the hall in an uproar with hysterical indoor servants running about aimlessly and outdoor serfs, coming in for information, blocking their way, whilst the Baron, mopping his brow repeatedly, roared out contradictory orders and urged them all to hurry.

He seized Sophie's arm and hustled her out to the waiting carriage, then pushed Juliette in onto her lap. Anna and the nursemaid followed, the door was slammed shut, then opened again hurriedly to have the last of the luggage hurled in, the horses were whipped up and, amid a hubub of shouts and cries from the deserted servants, they lurched down the road on the long drive to Königsberg. The Baron was riding alongside, his servants behind him, and Sophie could hear him shouting direc-

tions to the coachman, telling him not to go by the direct route, but to follow the country lanes.

Sophie at last collected her wits about her. Everything had happened in such a rush that she had not even eaten and poor Juliette must be hungry too. She looked down at her daughter, still half-asleep, and hugged her comfortingly. "Did you bring anything to eat, Anna?" she asked and Anna, looking scared, shook her head. Sophie sighed. She was quite sure this headlong flight was quite unnecessary. The French cavalry were far more likely to ransack the house in their absence than if they had been there to receive them. She was at a loss to understand the Baron's alarm, it seemed as though he had lost his head completely.

The carriage was going at such a pace that the occupants were flung uncomfortably from side to side. Sophie, intent on protecting the dozing Juliette from harm, found it hard to keep her balance and wished they could go more slowly, but the Baron, riding ahead of them in clouds of dust, was out of earshot.

They paid for their reckless speed over bad roads when they had gone no more than five miles from the manor house. A wheel worked loose and came off and although the coachman, with great skill, managed to bring the whole equipage to a halt very rapidly, the axle was also slightly bent. The Baron, shouting with annoyance, reined in his horse and came back to inspect the damage. Sophie, Juliette and the maids climbed out gingerly and stood in a group watching the men swearing and sweating as they tried to bend back the damaged axle and devise a new lynch pin for the wheel. But the wheel itself turned out to have cracked badly and the coachman, a stolid red-faced countryman, unintimidated by the Baron's cursing, maintained they needed a blacksmith before it would be safe to continue.

The Baron, enraged beyond measure by this setback, flourished his whip angrily. "Very well then," he shouted, "I'll ride on and get help from the next village. Stay

here by the carriage, Madame, do not allow anyone to stray away."

"Ludwig, would it be possible for you to buy milk and bread there, we have none of us eaten yet, we left in such a hurry?"

He grunted assent and swung himself up on his horse, helped by his servant who rode off with him. The coachman and the postilion unharnessed the horses and threw out the luggage to lighten the carriage, then crouched underneath trying to straighten the axle and talking in low voices. Sophie, who had been more shaken than she realised by the uncomfortable ride and the shock of the accident, felt suddenly faint. She hurriedly gave Juliette to her nurse and looked round for somewhere to rest, but apart from the grass at the side of the road which was wet with dew there was nowhere and she started to pace slowly up and down the road, hoping the fresh air would revive her. Quarter of an hour later her quick ears caught the jingle of harness and the sound of men's voices and, thinking it was the Baron returning with help already, she hastened back to the carriage to tell the others. But no sooner had she said, "I can hear the Baron returning," than from the direction in which they had come there appeared a squad of soldiers on horseback. The two men, straightening up from the wrecked carriage, gave a horrified exclamation, "French cavalry", before taking to their heels with a speed which belied their heavy build. The Frenchmen, spurring their horses on, fired one or two shots in the air from their carbines at the fleeing men before surrounding the carriage and the frightened women. One of the cavalymen, a sergeant, dismounted and came up to Sophie, who was holding her daughter again. She faced him bravely, after all they were her own countrymen, and enquired what they wanted, adding, "As you can see our carriage has broken down and we are awaiting repairs."

The sergeant stared at her without speaking and motioned to his men to dismount. When he spoke his accent was too thick for her to understand, for he was an Al-

sation. He repeated his sentence twice before she gathered that he was asking for the whereabouts of a Prussian unit. She shook her head helplessly, seeing out of the corner of her eye that the men were rifling through their scattered luggage.

"Please don't let them touch my things," she said to the sergeant, "I am French like you, a friend." But she might have said she was a Russian for all the notice the sergeant took. He grabbed hold of her wrist and wrenched it sideways so that she cried out with pain. "Tell me which way they went," he said in German.

"I don't know, I haven't seen any soldiers," Sophie replied desperately. He pushed her to one side and went up to the two maids, now weeping softly, and started to question them, but they broke into screams at the sight of his fierce moustaches and the carbine in his hand. Sophie, clutching the terrified and now wide-awake Juliette to her, began to think it was some hideous nightmare she was living through. These were Frenchmen, her own countrymen, and yet she could not persuade them that she was on their side. A few of the soldiers, having exhausted their examination of the luggage, came up to her and started to stroke the soft fur of her pelisse, discussing amongst themselves what fur it was. Sophie, finding they took no more notice of her remonstrances in French than if she were some wax doll, was almost impelled to start screaming like the maid-servants, if only to relieve her feelings and show she was alive. She felt a sharp shooting pain in her stomach, so severe that she nearly dropped Juliette. Some of the men were now examining the carriage horses, running their hands over their legs and wondering aloud whether they were worth taking. The men round her, having finished touching her pelisse, were fingering her rings, one of them boldly trying to pull them off. Sophie, seized by another violent spasm, screamed in despair, which brought a burst of loud crying from her frightened daughter, and made the soldiers fall back temporarily.

Suddenly from above their heads came the sounds of

a cool deep authoritative voice, "Sergeant Berckmann, call your men to order. This is no part of your duties frightening defenceless women and children." The men clanked away hastily, with mutters of "Oui, mon Colonel," and stood by their horses, leaving Sophie and the other two women looking up thankfully at their rescuer. He was sitting easily on a beautiful chestnut horse, dressed in a dark green uniform with heavy gold braiding. He saluted them politely. "I must apologise, Mesdames, for the rude behaviour of my men. Believe me, they will be punished severely." He gave the man a cold glare as he said this and they shuffled their feet, their spurs clinking, and muttered apologies under their breath. "I observe that your carriage has broken down. Have you far to go? Would it help if my men repaired it?"

"As you can see our coachman has run away, Monsieur," Sophie began and stopped as suddenly, her white face distorted by the clutch of another shooting pain.

"You are unwell, Madame?" the Colonel asked sympathetically, noting quickly that she was far advanced in pregnancy. He twisted round in his saddle and spoke to one of his orderlies, asking him to find the regimental surgeon, then handing his reins to the crestfallen sergeant he dismounted and came over to the women.

"Where were you going? Are you very far from your destination?"

"My husband was taking us to Königsberg, but we are only five miles or so from our own house."

"If my men can repair the carriage do you wish to return there or have you urgent business in Königsberg?"

"No, no, I should like to return home," Sophie said gratefully.

"And your husband, Madame?"

"He went to get help from the next village, he should be returning soon."

"Well, until he does come I will see what my men can do." He turned away to give orders to his chasseurs, who sprang obediently to work, but with no blacksmith at hand there was little they could do to mend the wheel.

The regimental surgeon rode up and the Colonel said to him in an undertone, "I think you have an imminent birth on your hands, M. Bouvet, see what you can do to help. If necessary we can use one of our own wagons to transport these women home, they live not far away."

Sophie was now in the grip of such violent pain that she could no longer bear to hold Juliette. The surgeon needed only one look at her to decide what was necessary and commanded his orderly to ride back and fetch the ambulance cart with all possible speed. Meanwhile he supported Sophie to the carriage, which had been propped upright by the soldiers, and helped her inside. Sophie lay back gasping on the cushions, too absorbed in her excruciating pain to know or care that she was amongst all these strange soldiers. By the time the ambulance arrived she was in too precarious a condition to be moved and the surgeon, with the aid of his instruments delivered the child in the carriage, a pathetic mangled corpse, a boy.

Sophie fell into merciful unconsciousness then and, after half an hour, was carried, greenish-white from loss of blood, into the ambulance cart, whilst the terrified maids, with the whimpering Juliette, climbed in as well, giving directions to the soldiers on how to reach the manor house. The Baron had still not returned and the Colonel, after directing his men to drag the carriage off the road, rode off with a squadron to search for the elusive Prussian troops who had been reported in the vicinity.

Sophie remained in a precarious state for a week and the doctor, who with the rest of the chasseur regiment had taken up temporary quarters in the outbuildings of the estate, called to see her twice a day. Eventually he was able to report to the Colonel that she was out of danger and he, feeling that an apology for his men's boorish behaviour was very necessary, asked permission to call on her for a few moments.

Sophie, her dark brown eyes huge in a face as white as her quilted dressing-gown, received him lying in the

great fourposter bed. The Colonel, feeling suddenly unnecessarily large and hearty, made vain attempts to quieten the jingling of his spurs and sabre and to walk quietly up to her bedside to kiss the hand she held out to him.

"I trust you are feeling better, Madame. I bring with me the good wishes of the whole regiment and apologies from the men concerned for causing you such suffering."

"Thank you, Monsieur, and please thank your men for their apologies. I do feel a little better now."

"I cannot tell you how much I regret that their actions should have caused you to lose your child. If there is anything we can do for you we shall be only too happy."

Sophie inclined her head gracefully and motioned the Colonel to sit down by the bedside, which he did with rather more *gaucherie* than he usually displayed, getting his sabre inexplicably entangled with his legs and reddening like a callow youth as he did so. The Colonel was very young to be in command of a regiment, only twenty-eight. He had fought hard, drunk hard, gambled hard and loved hard since he had entered the army at sixteen, but he found himself ill at ease in Sophie's presence. In spite of her pallor she was very lovely, he decided, and the dreadful experience she had been through, for which he felt partly responsible, enhanced her interest in his eyes. What he could not understand was how her husband had abandoned her completely in the circumstances, but he hesitated to mention this on his own initiative. He had learnt from the servants that the Herr Baron had been terrified out of his wits of French cavalry patrols and had decided to flee to Königsberg at short notice, but what sort of man could he be to leave his pregnant wife and young daughter stranded by the roadside at the mercy of the French without making any attempt to discover what had become of them since?

As if reading his thoughts Sophie said, "Have you had any news of my husband yet, Monsieur?"

The Colonel, embarrassed, shook his head. "I have to tell you, Madame, that my regiment has taken up tempo-

rary billets on your estate. I hope very much that this will not inconvenience you. We could not ask your permission whilst you were so ill, but I have no doubt that we shall be moving on soon when we get further orders. We have out-distanced our headquarters for the time being."

"I am happy to have you and your men here, Colonel."

"You speak excellent French, Madame, I congratulate you."

Sophie's pale face broke into an enchanting smile and the Colonel was taken aback. "But, Monsieur, I am French, I was born in Paris."

"Not really, I had no idea. You have come a long way from Paris then?"

"Alas, yes," Sophie said. "It is a long story which I must tell you sometime." She looked suddenly completely exhausted and the Colonel rose apologetically. "I have stayed too long, Madame, but I hope I may call on you again before we finally leave."

"By all means, Colonel—?" she looked at him interrogatively.

"Bresson, Madame."

"Good-bye, Colonel Bresson." He kissed her hand and backed out, feeling overwhelmingly sorry for this frail and beautiful young French girl who by some strange, and as yet unexplained, chance found herself in East Prussia, deserted by a husband who must be an arrant coward if, as he understood, he was not in the army and compelled to be with his regiment.

The chasseurs moved on in a few days in pursuit of a Prussian army under General l'Estocq and, except for visits from occasional patrols, the inhabitants of the manor house settled down to their normal pursuits. They were cut off from contact with their neighbours because of the presence of large French contingents in the area, but as winter was now approaching, they would have been isolated in any case. In the continued absence of the Baron, the overseer called daily to report to Sophie but

she, knowing nothing about running the estate, was forced to leave everything very much in his hands and hope that there would be sufficient food stored away to keep them all fed during the winter months.

She recovered her strength slowly and it was not until the middle of December that she was able to stay out of bed all day. Reports filtered through to them of a large Russian army advancing into East Prussia to give battle to the French, but as the weather was terrible, with incessant rain, which turned all the roads into quagmires, even if she had wanted to leave the manor house it would have been out of the question and she decided they were far safer where they were for the present. There was an inconclusive battle against the Russians at the end of December, but the muddy conditions made further action impossible and both sides retired to winter quarters until frost should arrive to harden the roads.

Sophie was playing with Juliette in her sitting-room early in the New Year when a servant came in to ask if she would receive Colonel Bresson who had arrived a few minutes before. Sophie, who had not really taken in much about the Colonel at their previous meetings except that he was courteous and charming, now saw that he was a very good-looking man, of medium height, giving an impression of great vigour, with dark curly hair and penetrating dark eyes which missed nothing. He bowed gracefully over her hand. "I have come to ask a favour, Madame. May my officers and men use your out-buildings as before for their winter quarters?"

Sophie hesitated a moment, she felt responsible for the people living on the estate and a regiment of cavalry would make huge inroads on their stores of food and fodder. The Colonel saw her hesitation and said, "We shall, of course, pay for the food and fodder we requisition. I promise you will not be the loser, Madame. I am sure you will be pleased to help your compatriots."

"I agree, Monsieur, on condition you also leave enough for our own people. But I hope that you and your offi-

cers will make yourselves comfortable in the manor house itself, we have some unused rooms which can be put at your disposal."

"We are very grateful to you, Madame. I am happy to see you looking so much better than last time we met. And this is your daughter." He bent down to talk to Juliette, who stared hard at this dark stranger in uniform before deciding to smile at him rather uncertainly.

"Are you living alone here, Madame?" Colonel Bresson asked tentatively, for he was curious to know whether her husband had ever returned.

"Yes," Sophie replied shortly, with such a hardening of her full lips that he was left in no doubt as to what she thought of her cowardly husband.

Although Sophie was pleased to hear French spoken all round her in the true accents of her countrymen, she purposely kept aloof from the Colonel and his officers to begin with. She was introduced to them all when they first settled in, but stayed in her own quarters and, beyond enquiring if they had everything they needed when she met any of them by chance and an occasional formal interview with the Colonel, they seldom saw her.

"A great pity that our hostess hides herself away so continually, God knows there is little enough female company in this benighted country," remarked one of the lieutenants at dinner in their mess one evening. He was a foolish headstrong young man with red hair and a great opinion of his own irresistible charm and bravery. "She has an exquisite figure. If I were her husband I would not leave her on her own amongst so many gallant Frenchmen."

His friend, a few years younger and a slavish imitator of the other's attitudes, giggled drunkenly. "Remember the pretty Countess on whom you were billeted in Vienna, Lenormand, she puts me in mind of her, I wager you would have the same success with this one if you were to lure her out of her solitude."

"What do you bet me?" Lenormand enquired ex-

citedly. "Since I played cards with the Major last week I have not a livre to my name."

"I wager 100 livres you overcome her reserve within a week."

"Done," said Lenormand, leaning across the table and slapping his friend's hand. "Let us drink to my success."

"And what is your wager, gentlemen?" the Colonel asked, leaning back easily in his chair, having overheard the end of their conversation.

Lenormand looked at him warily. Although the Colonel was very little older than himself, he had a quick temper and a ruthless authority which he had run up against to his disadvantage more than once. While he was deciding whether to disclose the terms of the wager, his friend, very much the worse for drink, blurted out boldly, "Why, that M. Lenormand lays successful siege to our hostess and conquers her within the week."

Lenormand wished his friend with the devil as he saw the Colonel's smiling face change in an instant to a grim mask of rage. "And I tell you, M. Lenormand, that if you carry out your proposed wager, you will find yourself back in France serving a term in a garrison town with the other old men. You may go to your quarters, Lieutenant."

"Oui, mon Colonel."

"As for you, M. de Polmorin, a quick walk in the snow to inspect our outposts may clear your fuddled head and restore your manners."

The Colonel surprised himself by the wave of rage which had swept over him when he heard of the two young men's foolish wager. In his time he had innumerable amatory adventures and had made many a similar bet with his friends, but something about Sophie had woken feelings in him which he was at a loss to explain and he felt he had to protect her. He got up abruptly to go to his room, leaving the other officers to raise their eyebrows and give subdued smiles at one another.

As the Colonel went to his room he heard distant

sounds of music coming from along the passage and he paused to listen. Of a sudden he forgot the years of resolute ambition which had driven him on from a beardless private of sixteen, through countless battlefields, to his present position, and he was suddenly back at home in Pau, listening to his mother and aunts playing and singing, whilst he, weary from nothing more strenuous than playing rough games with his young cousins, curled up on the floor to listen dreamily. The tune he could faintly discern was one he knew well and he hummed it under his breath as he took two more slow steps. He reached the doorway of his room and stopped irresolutely, wondering if he dared to turn back and knock on the door leading to the Baroness's apartments, from whence the music was coming. This irresolution was so unlike him that he laughed out loud after a moment. "*En avance, les chasseurs,*" he said to himself and walked boldly up to the door and knocked. The music stopped immediately and there was silence, so he knocked again. This time Sophie appeared in the doorway, dressed in a green velvet dressing-gown, trimmed with soft dark fur, her hair tied loosely back with a ribbon. She smiled rather uncertainly when she saw the Colonel. "Is something wrong, Monsieur?"

"No, Madame, but I was seduced by the sweet sounds I could hear coming from your apartments." He hummed a bar or two. "My mother used to sing that to me when I was ten or twelve, it must be years since I heard it, it made me feel homesick all of a sudden."

Sophie's face softened into one of her enchanting smiles. She had a tiny dimple in one cheek which the Colonel found adorable. "Would you like me to play it to you again, Monsieur? I am afraid I am rather out of practice." She led him into her sitting-room which was lit only by a single silver candlestick on the piano and the flickering flames from a cheerful fire.

The Colonel settled himself on a sofa and Sophie returned to the piano. She played very well in spite of her disclaimer about being out of practice and the Colonel

listened with pleasure, increased for him by the charming picture she made. Her cheeks were slightly flushed and her eyes shone in the light of the solitary candle when she looked over at him to ask for his favourites. At the end of an hour she stood up and came round to the fire to warm her hands.

"Are you thirsty, Monsieur? Would you care for some brandy?"

The Colonel assented politely and Sophie rang for a servant. When it had been brought she poured out two glasses and proposed a toast, "To France," to which he raised his glass and drained it, adding, "and the Emperor."

"I hope you will forgive my curiosity, Madame, but you promised once to tell me how you came to be here, so many miles from France."

"So I did," Sophie replied, sighing deeply.

"If it gives you pain, please ignore my curiosity," he said quickly, but Sophie shook her head. She sat down opposite him, gazing into the fire and began her story. She said very little about the Baron when she came to their marriage, but her face was so expressive that the Colonel had no difficulty in guessing her feelings towards him. There was a long pause when she had finished, he was wondering how best to express his regrets that, against her will, she had been swept so far away from country and friends, and she was thinking as she so often did, of the extraordinary progression of chances which had brought her here. If her mother had not been so much in debt, would she have become the Prince's mistress? If she had not been so ill and shocked after the carriage accident would she have allowed the old Princess to coerce her into marriage? If she had refused to marry the Baron and run away where would she be now? Her whole life was a succession of 'ifs' and she had seemed to have so little choice at the time.

"You never told me your name before you were married." The Colonel, having begun and then dismissed ten sentences of sympathy felt the silence between them

becoming burdensome and said the first thing that came into his head.

"Sophie de Monteval."

The Colonel sat there thunderstruck. "Then we have met before. No wonder I had the feeling your face was familiar."

Sophie stared at him. "I'm sure I would remember you, Monsieur, if we had met before. Where was it?"

The Colonel smiled reminiscently. He remembered vividly the week's leave he had spent in Paris with Sophie's beautiful mother, he remembered coming home with Marie-Françoise late at night and seeing her daughter, a slight girl of about twelve, with ruffled curls and big dark eyes which expressed such delight at seeing her mother and such bitter disappointment when she had been dismissed summarily to go to bed. He remembered trying to dispel that disappointment, momentarily angry with her mother for being so thoughtless, and the enchanting smile the small girl had given him when he promised to visit her at school. "I came to your mother's house, in the Rue de Lille, was it? But I don't expect you remember."

But Sophie did remember perfectly now and she blushed, recalling the dark-haired stranger in her mother's bed and the green chasseur jacket and white breeches lying on the floor, something she had not comprehended then, but did all too clearly now. Aloud she said, after a long constrained pause, "No, I don't remember. If you will excuse me Monsieur, it is late and I am tired."

The Colonel jumped up, full of apologies. "You must think me most inconsiderate, Madame, first of all for forcing my company on you without an invitation, then for making you play for an hour or more, but I can assure you it has given me great pleasure and I hope I am forgiven." He kissed her hand and looked at her entreatingly but Sophie did not respond and the Colonel knew, without realising why, that he had extinguished the mood of intimacy which had grown up between them

earlier. He walked away from her apartments, feeling angry and on edge.

The French army had thought themselves safe in winter quarters until the spring, and were not sorry to rest after their long journey from the Rhine to the Baltic, but an ill-judged move into the Russian zone in search of food by Marshal Ney's men had brought a Russian counter-offensive and by the end of January the Emperor was forced to order the rest of his troops out of their bivouacs to march northwards towards Königsberg.

Sophie woke one morning to find snow falling heavily, but in spite of this there were muffled sounds below of jingling harness and shouted orders and Anna, when she came in to dress her, said that the regiment was moving off. "In great hurry," she added.

Juliette came in with her nurse to kiss her mother good morning. "Want to see horses," she cried and Sophie, kissing her gently, said, "All right, my precious, but you must wrap up warmly, it's snowing outside." They went down the stairs together, hand in hand, and found the Colonel and his officers gathered round a map spread out on the floor, all of them enveloped in heavy cloaks and obviously ready to leave. The Colonel looked up from giving his final orders and stared at Sophie and her daughter with brilliant abstracted eyes. He had an air of determined excitement about him.

"We are leaving at once, Madame," he told her. "Many thanks for your hospitality."

Sophie wanted to ask if they were going into battle at once, but he turned away and strode out of the door, followed by his officers. Sophie, pulling her fur-lined hood closely about her face, took Juliette's hand and went out on the steps to watch the regiment moving off. It was a magnificent sight, even through the veil of heavy snow, to see the squadrons wheeling into position and trotting away while the Colonel, surrounded by his senior officers, sat motionless on his horse, inspecting them closely as they passed in front of him. When the last of them had gone by, the group of officers set spurs

to their horses and galloped after them, leaving Sophie and Juliette alone in the thickening gloom. Sophie shivered, wondering how many of them would be killed or wounded in the coming battle, and to dispel her sense of loss at the departure of the French troops, picked Juliette up and hugged her. "What horrible weather for campaigning. Come along, my precious, let's go indoors and get warm again."

Sophie's thoughts returned again and again in the next week to the Colonel and his regiment. The weather was abominable, very cold with a strong wind and with continual snowstorms, which seemed the worst possible weather for battles. It seemed incredible to her that anyone would choose to remain out in that weather, let alone fight. Ten days later it was already dark at two-thirty in the afternoon and Sophie was reading to Juliette in her sitting-room when Anna came running in with a scared look. "The French soldiers are returning, Frau Baronin. Many wounded. Please come quick."

Sophie, putting Juliette down gently so as not to frighten her, followed Anna down the gloomy stairs into the great hall. The first person she encountered was M. Bouvet, the surgeon, who, muffled to his eyebrows in a furred cloak, seized her hands and said urgently, "Madame, I have a great many wounded who, if their lives are to be saved, must be brought in from the cold. Have I your permission to bring them into your house rather than leave them in the outbuildings?"

"But of course, Monsieur. Only tell us what you want and we shall do our best to help you."

The servants had gathered in a frightened cluster at the far end of the hall and Sophie turned to them, telling them to follow the orders of the French surgeon, who would tell them what was needed. For the next hour or so the German servants and French orderlies worked together carrying in from the ambulance carts and sleighs what seemed a never ending stream of wounded men, who were deposited on the floor in the downstairs reception rooms. They were in a terrible state, most of them

with frozen limbs and bloodstained bandages, and it was difficult to know where to begin, but Sophie, with the help of Anna, the housekeeper Jelka and two of the more intelligent maids, moved amongst them, separating the more severely wounded, who needed the immediate attention of M. Bouvet and his assistants, from those who merely needed re-bandaging for the time being and to be given food and drink.

Sophie was on her knees beside a young dying boy, supporting his head as he struggled for breath, when she looked up and saw the Colonel gazing down at them both. She gave a startled exclamation when she saw his face, unshaven and drawn, disfigured by a puffy cut down one cheek. His eyes were bloodshot, his uniform slashed and filthy and he had a bloodstained bandage on one hand. He went down on his knees beside them and said very gently to the dying boy, "Well done, Jean my lad, you fought bravely, I am proud of you."

The boy turned his head slowly to look into the Colonel's face. "We sent them packing, eh, mon Colonel?" he gasped painfully.

"We did indeed, I am very proud of you all." He grasped the boy's hands and he, with a slow smile spreading over his cyanosed face, gave a small sigh and died. The Colonel closed his eyes and rose heavily to his feet, like an old, old man. His face was set and angry for a moment and Sophie, getting up as well, was too frightened to speak to him. She moved away to the next patient and, after a moment, the Colonel followed her, going down the line of wounded men, exchanging jokes with the less badly wounded, bending down to speak quietly to those who were dying.

It was not until after midnight that M. Bouvet, enveloped in a blood-stained apron, ordered Sophie peremptorily to get some rest. "Your help has been invaluable, Madame, but if you are to continue helping tomorrow you must go upstairs now and sleep."

Sophie protested, but the surgeon took her by the shoulders and turned her round. "Quick march. I will

see you in the morning." She went slowly up the stairs, looking down in surprise at her pale blue woollen dress which was covered with dirt and blood. She felt suddenly exhausted and barely had enough strength to drag off her clothes and climb into bed, where she fell asleep immediately.

At the end of the next day they had introduced some order into the improvised hospital, the more urgent cases had all been dealt with, the re-bandaging of the slighter wounds had been completed and all the men had been fed and made comfortable. M. Bouvet, pale and worn from his labours, had just finished thanking Sophie for her assistance, when the Colonel appeared silently by their side. Sophie had seen him from time to time throughout the day, going round the rooms tirelessly encouraging the men, his face now shaven and clean and his torn uniform replaced, and she knew from the comments made to her that the men idolised their Colonel.

"He may be strict when he's not fighting, but he looks after us like a father, there's nothing too good for his regiment," said one old soldier with a grizzled moustache, his eyes alight with devotion following the Colonel as he moved past his pallet with a quick jest and a smile. "And when it comes to action, why he's a demon. Them Russkis took one look at him, leading the charge through the snow and turned and fled as though the devil himself was after them."

Sophie glanced at him now, appalled by the grey weariness in his face and the unhealthy swelling of his damaged cheek. He smiled at her as though it were a great effort. "I don't know how we are ever going to thank you adequately, Madame, for all you have done for us these last two days. She has been wonderful, hasn't she, M. Bouvet?"

The surgeon nodded. "So I have been telling her, Colonel."

"I feel I am repaying a debt," Sophie said with quick deprecation. An orderly called M. Bouvet away and Sophie put her hand on the Colonel's arm. "Don't you

think, Colonel Bresson, you should have that cut attended to? You must think of yourself as well, you know."

The Colonel put his hand up to his face. All his movements were infinitely slow as though he were walking in his sleep. "I hadn't thought about it, to tell the truth. I got slashed across the face with a Russian sabre early on in the battle."

"Come upstairs with me," Sophie said firmly, as though speaking to Juliette. "I shall bathe and bandage your cheek, then you shall have some supper and go to bed. You have given yourself no rest since heaven knows when, Monsieur. Is that sensible behaviour for the Colonel of a regiment of brave chasseurs?"

The Colonel made a small grimace, his eyelids drooping wearily, and followed her obediently up the staircase. He almost fell into the chair she indicated by the fire and when she came back with a bowl of hot water and towels, his eyes were closed and he was breathing with a slow regularity. But as soon as she touched his cheek he opened his eyes and gave a sharp exclamation, jerking his face away from under her hand.

"Be sensible, Monseieur," she coaxed him gently like a child. "It is very swollen and if you don't let me bathe it you will get an infection and it will become worse."

He submitted himself then, wincing now and again, but making no sound till she had finished. She had given orders for supper to be brought and a maid now came in with bowls of thick vegetable soup and a bottle of red wine. She poured out a glass and made him drink, then practically fed him with the soup, for he could scarcely be bothered to make the effort to feed himself, almost dropping asleep between mouthfuls. When the bowl was empty she rang for the Colonel's servant and together they helped him on to his camp bed, which had been set up in a corner of one of the upstairs rooms.

When Sophie rose in the morning Anna reported that the Colonel was still asleep and Sophie, on her way

downstairs, went to look at him, a slow smile creasing her lips when she saw how young and defenceless he seemed, sprawled out on his back, his black curly hair dishevelled and his long dark lashes spread out in a fan on his pale cheeks, only the angry-looking cut and his bandaged hand reminding one that here was a seasoned veteran of many battles.

The Colonel did not appear all day and Sophie, who had spent the entire time with the wounded soldiers, paid him a visit on her way to her rooms and found him just waking.

"Are you feeling better, Monsieur?" she asked, with a sweet smile. The Colonel smiled back at her lazily, he thought he had never seen anything lovelier than Sophie at this moment, her dress creased and spotted with blood here and there, faint pale shadows of tiredness round her dark eyes and beautifully curved mouth, her hair escaping in damp curling strands on to her flushed forehead and cheeks. She put out a hand to touch his wound and he caught hold of it and said, "You're like an angel of mercy. We shall adopt you as our patron saint, Sainte Sophie, Madame."

She blushed and took away her hand. "When I have washed and changed, Monsieur, I think I had better bathe your face again."

"On one condition." She looked at him questioningly. "That you join me for supper."

She laughed uncertainly, moving away from him with a soft rustle of skirts. "You are tired, Monsieur."

"Nonsense, I've done nothing but sleep all day. Come, Madame, you ate with me last night. I seem to remember you fed me too. You don't want your patient to fade away with a broken heart?"

"My patient seems in very good spirits at the moment."

The Colonel groaned and clutched his heart. "Ah! I am wounded deeply, I shall die. Have pity on me, Madame."

"You are an atrocious actor, Monsieur."

"You don't think me a second Talma, then?"

Sophie laughed, remembering the great classical actor her mother had taken her to see in Paris. "All right, I agree."

But in spite of his gaiety during this exchange, the Colonel was in a sombre mood by the time Sophie had bathed and dressed his cheek and examined the bandage on his hand, which was giving him more pain than he would admit. He had been down for a quick inspection of the wounded men and a short conference with his remaining officers and he sat there, gazing into the fire broodingly, turning his wineglass round and round in his hands. Sophie did not interrupt his reverie, but waited patiently. She would have liked to ask more about the battle, was it a resounding victory for the French, would there now be peace?

The Colonel laid down his glass carelessly and it overbalanced and shattered on the floor. He bent to pick up the pieces and cut himself on a sharp splinter of glass, at which he swore fluently, then he looked up at Sophie and apologised. "My thoughts were far away, I am afraid. Do you realise the strength of the regiment has been more than halved in ten short days? And that I am left with only five officers? And yet we were lucky, one regiment, the 14th Chasseurs, were completely cut to pieces defending a hillock."

"Was it a great victory in the end, Monsieur?"

He laughed shortly. "If a victory means withdrawal of the enemy, yes, it was, but we left as many dead upon the field of battle as they did and many of those wounded will never fight again, as you have seen for yourself. The Russians are not defeated, but both sides are exhausted for the moment. When the spring comes we shall fight again."

Sophie stared at him without speaking and he answered her unspoken question. "We shall have reinforcements by then. We are all tired and depressed now by our losses, but give us a few months' rest and we shall recover our *élan*. The Emperor can perform miracles."

"Do you never grow weary of endless battles? Is it all worth it?"

"At times like these, when I count up the dead and wounded, all of whom I have known intimately, yes, I do wonder. But there is an excitement about a battle, which I hope I never lose. The thrill of charging down upon the enemy and seeing him break and run, of hand-to-hand combats with enemy cavalry when you know it is his life or yours, of a clever outflanking movement which catches him by surprise. It is all very like a game of chess, played with real men's lives at stake."

"All for the glory of France?"

"For France and the Emperor. There is a leader we can be proud of, all of us would willingly die for one approving word from him."

"And have you met him often?" Sophie thought back to the brief glimpse she had caught of him at school all those years ago.

"Often, he never forgets a face or name. I remember when he sent for me after Austerlitz. 'Good morning, Colonel Bresson' he said, stepping forward and pinching my ear. I was on the point of correcting him, 'Major Bresson, Sire' I was about to say, thinking he had forgotten—as if he would forget anything!—when he motioned to his aide-de-camp to hand me the commission he had just signed. 'How old are you, Colonel?' he asked me. 'Twenty-seven, Sire' I replied. 'At twenty-seven I was a General, Monsieur Bresson. You have not far to go to catch me up'." The Colonel's eyes shone and Sophie gave a faint smile, thinking his hero-worship made him look like an eager young boy.

"You are ambitious then?" she asked lightly.

The Colonel said arrogantly, "Unlike other armies, promotion is always open to merit in the Grande Armée. I started as a private in the Army of the Pyrenees, I have not done badly in twelve years."

The Colonel's wounds soon healed and with it his temporary depression and he set himself with all the energy and enthusiasm of youth to reorganise his regi-

ment. The more badly wounded were despatched across Germany to their homes and new recruits were arriving from depots in France to be drilled into shape. The Colonel came and went constantly through the dreadful winter weather from Imperial Headquarters established near by and Sophie saw him at infrequent intervals, though she was careful, as before, not to impose her presence upon her fortuitous guests.

But the Colonel seemed always to be making excuses to seek her out and once in her apartments he would stay on, talking over his latest schemes and often remaining to take supper with her. Sophie was a little frightened, sometimes, of the intimacy growing up between them, frightened of what it might develop into, but he was so gay and intelligent, so quick to improve upon her lightest allusions with wit and perspicuity that she found herself looking forward to an evening spent in his company and disappointed when he had to be on duty or away.

On one such evening the Colonel stretched his legs out before the fire, humming softly as Sophie played, and sighing with satisfaction that at last matters were improving and he could relax his efforts for the time being. He looked over at Sophie and smiled at her appreciatively, thinking how adorable she looked tonight in a dress of apricot silk and a pale cashmere shawl, which heightened the brilliance of her dark eyes and the shining silkiness of her brown hair. He had been preoccupied with his regiment of late, but now he had leisure to pursue a different objective and he began to plan his moves, much as he planned an outflanking movement on the enemy.

Sophie stopped playing after a while, disturbed by something indefinably different in the atmosphere tonight. She got up from the piano to wander restlessly round the room and the Colonel stayed where he was, watching her with a lazy smile, perfectly aware of the reason for her agitation and amused by it.

"You're like a restless cat prowling up and down," he

said at length. "Come and sit down," and he patted the sofa he was sitting on invitingly.

Sophie gave him a startled look, almost like a cat who is wary of a stranger's hand, and sat gingerly down in the opposite corner to him.

"Would you like a drink, Monsieur?" she asked nervously.

The Colonel shook his head and took up one of her hands, which she was clenching and unclenching abstractedly. "You are not nervous of me, are you?"

"No—no."

He kissed the hand he was holding and then her arm. "Sophie, you're adorable, I love you, do you know?"

Sophie drew in her breath quickly. "No, Monsieur, no."

"What is wrong, Sophie? Don't you like me kissing you?" He moved closer and turned her face round to his, kissing her full on the lips, which felt soft and deliciously warm, and parted unconsciously when he first touched them. "Sophie chérie, I adore you." He put his other arm round her tiny curved waist and drew her closer, putting his face down to kiss the smooth swell of her white breasts where they rose from her low bodice.

Sophie was trembling uncontrollably and trying to push him away. "Please, don't, please, don't," she almost sobbed.

"Chérie, what is it? Do I displease you?"

"Oh, no, but please, don't touch me."

He stroked her very gently on her arm and kissed her once more on her lips, which again parted unconsciously, seeming to surrender to him against her will, yet almost at once Sophie tried to struggle free and the Colonel was amazed at her terror of him.

"What is wrong, chérie?"

"You are taking advantage of me, Monsieur. If my husband were here to protect me you would not dare," she said in a shaking voice.

The Colonel, astonished, let her go for a moment and she stood up quickly. To invoke her husband's name,

that husband whom she obviously detested and who had abandoned her shamefully in the face of the enemy, was incredible. "Sophie, look at me. Do you really care about your husband?" he asked.

She shook her head, shuddering at the thought of him. "Sophie, my dearest, I want to look after you as he has not. I would never leave you on your own by the side of a country road. I love you with all my heart."

"Keep away from me," Sophie whispered, terrified both by her desire to be taken in his arms and by what might happen afterwards.

The Colonel stared at her, uncertain whether he should take her by storm tonight or retire gracefully to renew the battle another day. He was greatly touched by her agitation and he had no wish to force her, but he was afraid that if he left now he would lose another opening. Had not her lips promised something that her words denied? He went up to her and took her in his arms, stroking her hair and her face gently. "Sophie, don't be frightened of me, I love you."

She did not try to break away as he feared she might, but stayed in his arms, quivering like a cornered animal. He started to kiss her again very gently, subduing his own passion, and she gradually calmed down. He could feel her tension relaxing under his embrace and he grew bolder, bending his head to kiss her beautiful breasts, only half-covered by the silk of her dress. Sophie was breathing very quickly, but she did not push him away as before. He started to speak to her coaxingly in his slow deep voice, saying over and over, "Sophie, I love you, Sophie, you're adorable," and she was half-mesmerised by his repetitions and allowed him to lead her over to the bedroom. When he picked her up to lift her on to the bed, however, she twisted in his arms and turned over quickly, lying face downwards, clutching the cover despairingly and saying, "No, don't, please, don't. Please go away now."

The Colonel with a great effort mastered his anger that she had allowed him to get thus far and no farther.

He knelt beside her, stroking her regularly like a cat, and speaking to her soothingly. "Darling Sophie, I won't hurt you—turn over, Sophie—Sophie, I love you," and at last Sophie turned over slowly and put her arms round his neck trustingly. He kissed her passionately on her lips and felt Sophie returning his kiss with an ardour equal to his own. Very carefully, and with slightly shaking fingers, he slid the smooth yellow silk of her dress down and down, uncovering her slim body clothed only in a thin chemise. He continued to stroke her, widening his compass until he reached her thighs. At first Sophie's body grew rigid under his touch each time he got that far and she tried to wriggle away, but he persevered with infinite patience, still speaking to her in that soothing monotone until at length he could sense her muscles loosening and her excitement mounting, and he knew that the right moment had come. She received him quite passively and, after his earlier restraint, it was all over very quickly, but afterwards he took care to caress her lovingly, telling her in that deep seductive voice that she was adorable and he loved her very much. She put her soft arms round his neck and said in reply, "I had no idea it could be like that. You were so gentle, I didn't know anyone could be so gentle."

The Colonel swore under his breath. My God, he could visualise perfectly what her brute of a husband had done to her, no wonder she had been so terrified. For all her married life she had been raped brutally and unfeelingly and had never been taught what real passion and love could be like. He passed his hand over her naked body. "Sophie dearest, you're like a beautiful soft white kitten. No one could ever hurt you."

"I don't know what your name is?" she said shyly, kissing him on the cheek. "I can't call you 'mon Colonel' all the time."

He laughed. "André. Do you love me a little, Sophie?"

"Oh, yes, I do, André."

He stayed with her till morning, making love to her once more and delighted to find that this time she made

an effort to respond instead of lying there inertly. They lay in each other's arms afterwards, examining each other's faces with sleepy curiosity.

"Your cut has quite healed now, but you'll always have a scar there," Sophie said, fingering it lightly.

"It's not the first scar I've received," he replied and for the first time she saw that his compact and vigorous body was marred by puckered cicatrices, two across his thighs, one on his shoulders, one across his left forearm and the newly healed one on his right hand. "One for each battle? They look so deep. Did they hurt very much at the time?"

"They soon healed, but until this last time I never had such a beautiful nurse to tend them."

After the Colonel had left her Sophie lay in bed in a daze of happiness, thinking how tender and affectionate he had been and how much she loved him. Anna came in to dress her and said reproachfully, "Why you not ring for me last night, Frau Baronin. However late I come." She picked up Sophie's silk dress and clicked her tongue disapprovingly when she saw it was slightly torn. She glanced then at her mistress, dreamily stirring her coffee, and smiled to herself slyly, half-suspecting the truth.

When Juliette's nurse brought her Sophie fondled her absentmindedly and the child, sensing her mother's disinterest, clamoured for attention rather petulantly. Usually Sophie would have responded but today she could not be bothered and said to Juliette sharply, "No, you can't play with that. If you can't be a good girl you must go back to the nursery," and was conscience-stricken when Juliette, taken aback at her mother's unkindness, burst into tears.

As the day went by Sophie could not settle to anything, she gave her household orders, then tried to do some embroidery, but threw it down after ten minutes, having pricked her finger absentmindedly twenty times at least. Next she took up a book, but found her atten-

tion wandering so much that she lost the thread of the story and shut it up with a bang.

She played dutifully with Juliette; but all the time she kept thinking of the Colonel, wondering when she would see him again and half-afraid that the magic would be gone. Did he really mean it when he said he loved her and wanted to look after her? She was in a fever of impatience by the time evening came and when she looked in her mirror as she was changing her cheeks seemed hectically flushed, like someone with a high temperature. She was still examining herself critically in her glass when she heard a knock on her sitting-room door and started, looking round at Anna with enormous eyes and putting her hand to her throat. Her voice came out unaccountably hoarse when she said, "See who it is, Anna," and Anna, her eyes crinkling knowingly, asked, "And if is Colonel, you can see?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Sophie stayed at her dressing-table, her heart thumping violently as she heard the Colonel's deep voice and his laugh as Anna said something inaudible. Anna came back. "Is Colonel, Frau Baronin. You want supper later?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. I'll let you know." She smoothed back a straying curl and stood up slowly, her knees shaking, and went towards the sitting-room door.

The Colonel was standing by the fire and he turned quickly when he heard the faint rustle of Sophie's silk skirts. He did not say a word, but his face expressed his feelings so clearly that Sophie felt faint with happiness.

"Good evening, Monsieur," she said, giving him a timid smile. He held her outstretched hand and kissed it fervently, then straightened up and laughed. "We are being very formal with each other tonight, Madame." His bright eyes mocked her and she felt confused, unable to think of anything to say.

"Would you care to have supper with me, Monsieur le Colonel? I must let the servants know."

The Colonel bowed. "I shall be enchanted, Madame." She went to the door of the bedroom to tell Anna, "Sup-

per in an hour, please," and Anna, giving them both a sweeping glance, bobbed a curtsy and went away.

"Have you been busy today, Monsieur?" Sophie asked, advancing towards him.

"I have, very. Shall I tell you with what?"

"Please," Sophie replied, seating herself in a chair and politely indicating another to the Colonel, but he came towards her and dropped on his knees in front of her, putting his arms round her waist. "Sophie, my dearest one, I have done nothing all day but think of you, of how adorable you are and how much I longed to see you once more. A dozen times I have been on the point of coming upstairs to see you and my officers and men must have thought me out of my mind when I couldn't answer the simplest questions coherently. Heaven alone knows what I said to them, nothing that made any sense, I am sure. Have you thought of me, too?"

"Oh, André, all day long. The hours seemed endless till you came and yet when I heard your knock I was terrified."

"Why should you be, chérie?"

"I thought it could all have been a dream," Sophie replied, touching his face lovingly. André seized her hand and kissed it on the palm. "I'm very much flesh and blood." He jumped up and pulled Sophie up into his arms. "And as soon as we have had supper I mean to prove it to you."

It was not long before the officers and men realised that Sophie had become their Colonel's mistress and they sighed sentimentally and wished them luck from the bottom of their hearts. They were both so transparently in love that it could hardly be hidden from anyone and the men, who had never forgotten Sophie's unselfish labours on behalf of their wounded and who adored their Colonel, smiled indulgently on them and adopted Sophie as their mascot.

Although André was necessarily busy with the affairs of his regiment he made plenty of opportunities to be with Sophie during the long evenings and once the

weather improved they went riding together in the burgeoning woods. André had had many lighthearted affairs with women of all nationalities during his campaigns, but with Sophie he was, for the first time, deeply and wholeheartedly in love and prepared to enjoy the pleasures of domesticity. Sophie was blissfully happy with him, he was so thoughtful, so tenderly passionate that she could not believe it possible, it was a revelation to her after the coarse insensitivity of her husband; and what was more she discovered with him a gaiety and joy which had deserted her of late.

But in spite of her happiness she was always, in her heart of hearts, desperately apprehensive that it was all ephemeral, like everything in her life so far, that at any moment André would ride away at the Emperor's bidding to the farthest ends of the earth or her husband would descend on them to claim both her and Juliette. She had tried once or twice to voice her fears to André but he, who lived very much in the present, scoffed at them angrily. "You shall come with me, my angel, when we move on, wherever we go." And he really meant it. Before meeting Sophie he had kissed his loves good-bye with a minimum of regret, had sighed sentimentally occasionally, perhaps, with a memory of a pretty nose and mouth here, a soft, silky skin there. But Sophie with her air of a little girl ill-used by life, her sweet dependence on him, made André determined never to desert her if he could help it.

"Will you even take me into battle against the Russians?" Sophie dreaded the coming of spring because it brought the threat of fighting nearer and the Russians were across the River Passarge, an ominous, ever-present threat of 50,000 men.

"Oh, we shall beat the Russians soundly this time, never fear," André answered firmly. "I shall return to you covered in glory. Perhaps I shall become a General. Wouldn't you like to be the mistress of a General?"

"Oh, André," Sophie wanted to say, "I only want to be with you, I don't care if you're a General or an

ordinary private." But she knew how ambitious her lover was, so she kissed him quickly and said, "One day you will get a Marshal's baton, perhaps."

"That would be a goal worth striving for." His mouth took on a determined set and his eyes looked through her to a glorious future when he might become a Marshal of the Empire, a Prince, a Duke.

The Emperor Napoleon had established his headquarters at the nearby Castle of Finckenstein and André returned from there late one evening in a state of suppressed amusement. "My dearest love," he said to Sophie when they were lying in the great four-poster bed together, "I am not the only one to find happiness in this bleak wilderness. Do you know what the Emperor has been doing in the intervals of re-equipping the army?"

"Has he sent for the Empress from Paris?"

"No, my precious. He wrote and told her the roads were too bad for travelling and, like me, he has found himself an adorable mistress, a Polish Countess, with whom he spends his evenings in front of huge log fires."

"How do you know about it?"

"It is common knowledge among his staff. I saw her for myself this afternoon, setting out for a ride with de Caulaincourt."

"And is she very lovely?"

"Mm." André teased her for a while, speaking of the Countess Walewska's fair hair, blue eyes and exquisite figure in exaggerated terms while Sophie tried to hide her jealousy. Then he relented, turning over to embrace her with ardour.

"No, Sophie dearest, I would not change places with the Emperor at the moment, even for a Marshal's baton."

Their peaceful life together was disrupted as the days grew longer and the sun grew warmer. By the beginning of June the armies were on the move again and André's regiment received orders to ride north to join up with the main body of the Grande Armée advancing to meet the Russians at Heilsberg.

Sophie did her best to appear calm and enjoy the few

hours that André, absorbed in the minutiae of getting his men *en route* once more, was able to spare to be with her. But when he arrived in her apartments well after midnight on the eve of their departure, she, who had been sitting waiting for hours, found it impossible to control her tears. She flung herself into his arms, weeping bitterly and said, "Oh, André, I can't bear to see you go. What if you never come back?"

André, already in his mind aching to be off and in action again, was not disposed to be patient with her. "Come, Sophie dearest, dry those tears, I am not dead yet. We have only a few hours left together, I must be up at five again." And he drew her towards the bedroom. But Sophie was almost hysterical with fear and would not stop crying. "André, I have a premonition, you will be killed or badly wounded and I shall never see you again."

André just restrained himself from the irritation he felt with her tears. He reminded himself of all she had been through, of how much he loved her and he took her tenderly in his arms.

"Sophie dearest, I may be killed, we all have to face that, but don't let's assume I will be before it has happened. If you are going to live with me you will have to get used to saying good-bye bravely."

"I know I'm a coward, but I love you so much, André." Sophie turned her dark eyes, brimming over with tears, up towards him and he bent and kissed her wet face compassionately. "And I love you, Sophie, with all my heart." He pushed back the muslin wrapper she was wearing and held her naked body against his own hard lean body and Sophie, in spite of her grief, responded to his passion willingly. When they had made love they lay awake talking, unwilling to lose a moment of the brief time left together in sleep. As the first rays of sun slanted across the ceiling, André rolled off the bed and started to dress rapidly, while Sophie watched him with dark, sorrowful eyes. In the middle of pulling on his boots André said suddenly, "Put on your riding

clothes, Sophie, and you can ride with us part of the way."

Sophie exclaimed with delight, jumping out of bed and starting to pull open cupboards and drawers in a frenzy. André finished the fastening of her riding habit with slightly clumsy fingers and put his arms round her. "No more tears, dearest, promise. The regiment will be watching us, remember."

"No more tears, but you will take great care of yourself, André."

"On my honour. I'm as impatient as you are to be with you again."

They went downstairs together and found everyone astir, the clear summer air resounding with shouted orders, the clinking of harness, the jingling of spurs and sabres and the snorts and pawing of the horses. André's horse was already saddled and he gave orders for Sophie's usual mount, one of his own spare horses, to be brought round at once. When it came he himself helped her to mount, pressing her hand significantly as she bent forward to take the reins. She gave him a small sad smile and, satisfied, he leapt lightly into his saddle and trotted forward to ride up and down the waiting squadrons. When his inspection was over he signalled to Sophie to join him and together they rode at the head of the regiment as it streamed away from the manor house and its outbuildings.

Sophie went as far as the crossroads where they would be turning north and here André reined in his horse and took up his position at the side of the road, with Sophie beside him, and they let the regiment pass by in serried ranks. Glancing from time to time at André's face Sophie saw him watching his men with a fierce pride which was entirely justified, for by hard work he, his officers and non-commissioned officers had built up their depleted ranks after the Battle of Eylau into a well-trained, well-disciplined fighting force. When the last of them had gone past André reached over and took Sophie's small gloved hand to raise it to his lips. "A bientôt," he said, then

set spurs to his horse and galloped after them, leaving Sophie and the old orderly who had been detailed to escort her home, looking after them with regret. The old man sat patiently in his saddle until Sophie, giving a deep sigh, wheeled her horse round to start for home.

"Ah! it's a fine sight, the regiment going by," the old man said as they rode slowly back side by side and he reminisced about ancient battles and gallant charges against impregnable positions which were not calculated to make Sophie more composed about André's vulnerability.

The three weeks which followed were days and nights of torture for Sophie. The sun shone and the scent of flowers hung deliciously and heavily on the still air, but it all seemed a beautiful mockery when somewhere to the north the same sun shone on André and his men charging recklessly into danger. During the daytime she was able to keep her mind off him by playing with Juliette, taking her for picnics in the woods or reading to her in the peaceful garden, but at night she could not sleep, lying awake in the white twilight, endeavouring to read a book, but jumping at every least sound and imagining the heavy beat of horses' hoofs coming down the road. The great bed seemed vast and lonely with no André beside her and when Juliette came to kiss her good morning at eight o'clock her eyes were nearly always drooping and shadowed from lack of sleep.

She was sitting down to a lonely dinner on June 21st. when Lieutenant Lenoir of the Chasseurs was announced. He was a young man from Normandy with a long sad face like a bloodhound's and when he entered slowly, bowing lugubriously to Sophie, she stood up, clutching the chairback, her hands trembling. "Something's happened to Colonel Bresson?" she said faintly from a dry throat.

"No, Madame," the Lieutenant said, "he has sent me to escort you to Tilsit where the Emperor is to meet the Russian Emperor to discuss peace terms in the next few days."

Sophie felt lighthearted with relief, she could have flung her arms round the young man's neck. Instead she told the servants to lay a place for him and invited him to sit down and tell her what had been happening.

The young man was neither eloquent nor explicit. "Why, Madame, we rode north when we left here and joined up with Marshal Murat's cavalry. We attacked Heilsberg on the 10th June and suffered heavy losses, but the Emperor pressed forward on the left flank and forced the Russians out of their positions. We rode over the battlefield of Eylau and turned northwards to Königsberg to cut off the Russian's supply line and pursue the Prussians under General l'Estocq and meanwhile the Emperor attacked the main Russian army at Friedland, beating them soundly. We drove the Prussians north-east and cornered them at Tilsit and three days ago the Russian commander asked for an armistice."

"And have you had many casualties?"

"About 150 all told."

"And the Colonel, was he hurt?" Sophie fretted at the way in which she had to drag out all the details she was longing to hear. Had the young man no imagination, did he not realise her impatience? He sat there, stolidly chewing, giving bald answers to her excited questions until Sophie could have screamed.

Sophie would have liked to start there and then for Tilsit, but regard for Lieutenant Lenoir, who had ridden hard all day, made her abandon the idea. Instead they started at six the next morning and by evening on the second day were in Tilsit. The little town was full of troops and curious visitors and the only lodging André had been able to find her was a small, bare room in a widow's tiny shack on the outskirts. But to Sophie, tidying herself after her journey, it was completely immaterial. She was just brushing her hair when the sound of rapid footsteps and the jingling of spurs on the narrow wooden stairs heralded André's approach and she jumped up, brush in hand, to throw herself into his arms.

"André, my dearest, thank God you're safe." He lifted

her off the ground in his exuberance and swung her round and round till she was breathless and dizzy.

They spent two ecstatic weeks together in Tilsit while the French and Russian Emperors met on a raft in the middle of the River Niemen to discuss the peace terms, and contingents from the two armies fraternised together. André was able to spend very little time with her, her lodgings were cramped and stuffy, and yet to Sophie this fortnight was sheer heaven, heaven because André had come through the fighting unscathed and they were more passionately in love than ever.

But one morning while André was busy with regimental duties, Sophie, bored with sitting in her tiny room, went for a short stroll in the town, crowded with sight-seers anxious to get a glimpse of all the important people. Across the River Niemen could be seen the Russian encampments and as always Sophie looked at them curiously, watching the sun glinting on the sentries' breastplates and hearing the shouted orders in an unfamiliar tongue. A troop of French hussars clattered down the street noisily and, drawing back with the other pedestrians into a doorway to let them pass, Sophie caught sight of her husband across the way, standing with a group of Prussian officers, including her brother-in-law, Friedrich. It seemed like a century ago since he had left her standing by the roadside and yet it was less than a year. Sophie felt her feet rooted to the spot, she wanted to turn and run away before it was too late, but she was hemmed in by the crowd and could not move.

As the dust subsided Friedrich looked across and saw her. He nudged his brother who, slow as always, took a minute or two to realise what he was saying. Then, looking cautiously from left to right, he crossed the street and came up to her, taking off his hat and bowing. His face was red and unpleasantly sprinkled with beads of sweat and his little blue eyes glanced at her and away again shiftily.

"Why, Sophie, you are the last person I expected to see here. What are you doing in Tilsit?"

"I might ask you the same question, Monsieur. When I last saw you you were *en route* for Königsberg in a great hurry." Sophie's tone was icily contemptuous and the Baron flushed.

"I can explain everything—I was prevented from returning by an unfortunate succession of circumstances. But are you well, Sophie, what of the child? And Juliette, is she here with you?"

"The child was born dead by the roadside, Monsieur, delivered by a French surgeon, one of those from who you were fleeing in such haste. I don't know if it consoles you to know that it was a boy."

The Baron shuffled his feet in the dust. "I hope you did not suffer too much?" he mumbled.

"I would have died had it not been for the French soldiers to whom I owe my life. As to Juliette, she is at home and well. And where have you been all these months, Monsieur?"

"Besieged in Königsberg by the French, Madame. Is everything all right at Frankenberg?"

"If it is, it is small thanks to you. Do you mean to return there now?" Friedrich came over, before the Baron could answer, and bent to kiss Sophie's hand. His handsome face was disfigured by a scarcely healed scar which stretched from forehead to chin. Sophie tried not to stare at it, but he saw her look of dismay and, fingering it delicately, said, "Yes, one of your countrymen did that. Pretty, isn't it?"

"What a pleasant reunion," he went on, looking sardonically from his brother's mottled cheeks to Sophie's bright angry eyes. "I will not interrupt it, but I felt it would be rude not to pay my respects. Are you on your own here, my dear Sophie?"

Sophie, feeling cornered, looked from one brother to the other, wishing she had never gone out alone. As if in answer to her unspoken wish for help André rode down the street at the head of a small group of his officers and men and reined in his horse with astonishment at the sight of Sophie flanked by two tall men,

one a heavy bull-necked man in beaver hat and civilian clothes, the other a Prussian officer. He dismounted hastily, flinging his reins to his orderly, and came up to them, his sabre clinking on the ground.

"Madame la Baronne," he said formally, "may I escort you back to your lodgings?"

Sophie flashed him a look of gratitude, which was not lost on Friedrich. "I should be very pleased to accept your escort, Monsieur. May I introduce my husband, Baron von Frankenberg, and his brother, Baron Friedrich von Frankenberg. This is Colonel Bresson who has been billeted on us with his regiment for the past four months."

The men bowed to each other stiffly. André was both smaller and slighter than the two Prussians and Sophie felt worried lest, with his quick temper, he would say something hasty which would provoke a quarrel and find himself at a disadvantage.

"Since we have met again, Sophie, I will escort you back to your lodgings," her husband growled at her. Sophie turned pale and André, his hand on his sabre, said angrily, "I should have thought you had forfeited a husband's rights, Monsieur le Baron, when you deserted your wife last year on the road to Königsberg."

"What business is it of yours?" said the Baron, hunching his shoulders forward menacingly and lunging for Sophie's arm. She shrank back against the wall and André placed himself in front of her, putting his free hand up to push unavailingly at the Baron's heavy chest. A knot of curious spectators had gathered in the road to gape and the chasseurs forced their horses forward to come to their Colonel's rescue. Friedrich, glancing round at the Frenchmen bearing down on them threateningly, tugged at his brother's arm. "Come away, Ludwig. We are outnumbered."

The Baron did not hear him, he was glaring down at this impertinent Frenchman who was trying to separate him from his wife. He put up his long arms to crush him like a bear and found himself pinioned from behind by a

chasseur. Roaring like an angry bull he was dragged away and André, drawing his sabre, rushed after him. Friedrich, his scar suddenly a hideous red in his very pale face, said to the terrified Sophie, "So you have found yourself a French protector, Madame, after all your pious outbursts about your wifely virtue. You are a whore like your mother after all." Sophie burst into tears and Friedrich, giving her a scornful look, disappeared into the *mêlée*. It had every appearance of developing into a pitched battle between French and Prussians, when it was broken up abruptly by the arrival of outriders clearing a way for the Emperor's carriage. The French fell back to one side of the street, the Prussians to the other and everyone looked towards the open carriage being driven rapidly towards them in a cloud of dust. Sophie had a glimpse of the Emperor's face, a pale, classical profile, as the carriage swept past and disappeared. The interruption was timely, the Prussians had melted away down side streets and the French, panting with their exertions and covered with dust, brushed off their uniforms and wheeled their horses into position. André, sheathing his sabre, came back to Sophie and took her by the arm. "Are you all right, *chérie*? I had better take you back to your lodgings immediately, you were foolhardy ever to come out alone." He gave rapid orders to his chasseurs and set off on foot with Sophie, his men following behind at a gentle walk and leading his horse.

Sophie was still weeping. The shock of seeing her husband again, his threatening manner and André's danger in defending her had all combined to unnerve her. But until they reached her room André disregarded her tears. Then he shut and locked the door and took her in his arms. "What is it, Sophie dearest? Don't cry any more, you're safe now."

"Oh, André, I'm frightened. You saw what he was like, he will come back now and take possession of me again. I hate him, I hate him."

"Sh, dearest, don't weep so, you'll make yourself ill. I

will protect you, you've no need to go back again, you can stay with me forever."

"But, André, I have left Juliette at home, I must go back. Now he knows where I am he will leave no stone unturned until he finds me. And Friedrich, too. He hates me, he hates all Frenchmen, I'm frightened of them both."

Nothing André could say would calm her and having seen for himself what her husband was like he could not blame her for being frightened. Friedrich he had hardly noticed, so that he underestimated their combined intelligence. If anything Sophie had been more frightened of Friedrich's sneering remarks than she had of her husband's physical violence. She knew how vindictive he was and was afraid he would influence his elder brother and spur his slow brain into action out of spite.

"I must go home, André, if anything should happen to Juliette I would never forgive myself."

"Sophie dearest, you can't go alone. I will get a few days leave and come with you. Wait here, don't go out till I come back and then we will arrange everything."

"André, promise me you won't be long. God knows what will happen if he should find me again." Sophie clung to him desperately and André had a hard time persuading her to let him go. He stationed a chasseur at her door and rode off into town to get permission to absent himself for a few days.

He was away a long time and it was not until after midnight that he returned and Sophie, who had trembled at every sound in the road outside and had gone over and over the afternoon's episode, welcomed him back with a deep sigh of relief.

"All is well, chérie," he said. "After we have settled your affairs I have received orders to go to Warsaw. You and Juliette can travel with me and your husband will never dare to follow us there."

"THE GENERAL has sent me, Madame, to express his regrets that he will be unable to dine with you as arranged, but he hopes to see you later at the ball in the French Embassy."

"The General?" Sophie asked absently, intent on fastening her bracelet, she had been in the middle of dressing when interrupted. "What General? Do you mean General Designy?" She thought she recognised the young officer who had been ushered in, but she could not place him for the moment.

"Why, General Bresson, Madame." The young officer allowed himself a discreet smile when he saw the astonishment and delight spreading over Sophie's beautiful face.

"But when did this happen?"

"This morning, Madame. The General has been good enough to appoint me to his staff."

"I am sure you will be invaluable to him, Monsieur. Weren't you with him when he was wounded at Echmühl? I remember you came to visit him when he was still confined to bed."

"Yes, Madame, I was." The young man saluted her and withdrew to return to his duties, thinking that his General was indeed lucky to have such a charming mistress. He knew that she had hurried to his side when he had been wounded in April and that it was entirely due to her devoted nursing that the newly-promoted General was now on his feet again.

Sophie, her thoughts full of André's elation at his pro-

motion, went to re-arrange her dinner table. They had been going to give a small dinner party to various staff-officers of André's acquaintance and without him the dinner would lose much of its point, but it was too late now to put the others off.

It was striking midnight when Sophie, escorted by one of her guests, entered the ballroom of the French Embassy. The room was crowded already and she searched vainly for André among the knots of gossiping guests on the edge of the dance floor. When they had greeted the ambassador and his wife, her escort asked her to dance and swept her into a waltz. Sophie adored dancing and her partner was a good dancer, but she was impatiently scanning the throng as they revolved, anxious to congratulate André at the earliest opportunity and her answers to his remarks were a trifle distraught. Then, just as the music stopped, she saw him arrive, still limping from the wound he had received at Echmühl, five months before, but with his head held high, looking remarkably young and handsome in his new gold-embazoned uniform and General's sash, followed closely by two A.D.C.s. He was at once surrounded by people eager to congratulate him, for he was well-liked among his comrades, and Sophie found herself edged aside in the press, chafing at her enforced wait. When they at last came face to face André's eyes lit up with pleasure and he grasped Sophie's hands in his. "Are you proud of me?" he demanded, like a small boy seeking approval, and Sophie answered, "A General at thirty, not quite as good as the Emperor, perhaps, but I'm so pleased for you, André, you deserve it, really you do."

He put his arm round her small waist proprietarily and held her for a moment. "Ma chérie, without you I would not have lived to be promoted, so I owe it to you as well. I haven't eaten yet," he went on, "I've been too busy. Come with me to the buffet, ma chère. I'm afraid you're not going to get any dances with me tonight, my leg is still too stiff, but then should Generals lower their dignity by waltzing?"

"If Marshals can waltz, then I don't see why Generals shouldn't," Sophie replied, watching the frosty-faced, bald-headed Marshal Davout, circling the floor with an Austrian countess.

"About the only time he does relax," André said grimly. He respected the Marshal for his tactical skill, incorruptibility and devotion to the interests of the rank and file, but had found him an exacting taskmaster since he had been attached to his staff.

"Will you still be with him now you are a General?"

"Unfortunately, yes. He is going north, to Hamburg, that's where we shall be stationed next, *ma chérie*."

Ever since the peace of Tilsit, and up to the time of the campaign in Austria at the end of March, Sophie and her daughter had been living with André in Warsaw. The Baron had made no efforts to pursue them in spite of Sophie's fears. In 1808, finding herself pregnant, Sophie had plucked up courage to write to him, asking if he would divorce her, but she had received no reply and she and André had been unable to regularise their liaison, much as they would have liked to do so. Their child, a daughter called Cecile, had lived only a few months, to their great grief, and since then Sophie had not conceived again. André was kind to Juliette but Sophie was aware that he only tolerated her daughter because he loved her and although this often saddened her, for she adored Juliette to the point of spoiling her outrageously at times, she accepted it as part of the price she had to pay for leaving her husband and becoming André's mistress. She sometimes remembered wryly that Prince Karl-August had resented her in much the same way, although he had done less to conceal his dislike than André did—history was repeating itself. Although her situation was occasionally difficult she found that most of André's brother officers accepted their wholehearted devotion to each other quite matter-of-factly and André himself was so considerate, so quick to protect her from any mark of discourtesy that she was seldom made to feel uncomfortable. Their love for each

other had been strengthened and deepened by their sorrow when their child had died. André had been a very proud father and her death had come as a great shock to him. Sophie perceived that his resentment of Juliette had grown since then and she took pains to keep her out of his way as much as possible. But with vivid memories of her own childhood she did not want Juliette to feel neglected and she had been glad that just before Cecile's birth she had found a middle-aged German woman, whose mother had been French, whom she had engaged to act as governess to her daughter and of whom Juliette was very fond. Liselotte Bredow was a charming person, in spite of her plain round shining face and over-plump figure and Juliette soon looked on her as a second mother. So much so that when the distraught Sophie had received the news of André's serious wound and had been anxious to go to Vienna to nurse him, she had had no qualms over leaving her daughter in Liselotte's care under the roof of her old father, who was a civil servant in Weimar.

She said now, "When shall we be leaving for Hamburg, André?"

"In a week or two. Why?"

"I shall have to collect Juliette and Liselotte Bredow from Weimar on the way. Do you have to go to Hamburg direct?"

"I think so, yes. I shall be travelling with the Marshal. Surely Juliette is quite happy in Weimar for the time being, we can send for her when we are settled." André's tone was careless and disinterested and Sophie said, sharply for her, "I have not seen her for three whole months, remember."

"I don't expect she has missed you, children can be surprisingly happy without their parents. Mlle. von Bredow is quite capable of looking after her."

"She is my daughter," Sophie said quietly and André gave her a quick glance which expressed fully his dislike of that fact. "As you wish." He shrugged his shoulders

and his heavy gold epaulettes glinted in the candlelight. "You can go on ahead, perhaps before I leave."

For a moment Sophie hated him and she turned away to hide the tears which came to her eyes. If only she and André were legally married and had had more children, perhaps then he would have accepted Juliette more readily as part of their family. André was talking to two officers who had come over to congratulate him, however, and did not notice her misery. After a moment he took her by the arm and introduced them and Sophie was forced to smile graciously and say the right things.

A fortnight later Sophie left Vienna *en route* for Weimar in a comfortable carriage which André had procured for her. They were to re-join each other at Hamburg in a fortnight's time. But even so Sophie's thoughts were gloomy as they rolled on over the well metalled roads of southern Germany. The subject of Juliette had not been mentioned in so many words again, André had grudgingly made the arrangements for her journey north, but it had cast a palpable shadow between them and taken some of the lustre from the pride they both felt in his promotion. Sophie found herself torn between her great love for André and her equally tender love for Juliette and she could see ahead of her in the years to come endless occasions when she might have to sacrifice the one to the other.

She arrived in Weimar late in the evening, feeling tired and travel-stained, and was glad to see Herr von Bredow's tiny spick and span house with its freshly painted door and bright window boxes of geraniums. The door was opened by a maidservant and behind appeared the round, surprised face of Liselotte herself. "Frau Baronin," she cried, "I thought you were still in Vienna. What about Juliette?"

Sophie, her head aching after the long journey, looked at the governess in blank astonishment. "What do you mean? Surely Juliette is here with you and in bed?"

"But no, Frau Baronin, as soon as I received your letter brought by the Colonel's adjutant I did as you told

me, packed up her things and saw her off with him and her nursemaid to Vienna."

Sophie put up her hand to her head, convinced she was in a nightmare. "But, Liselotte, I sent no letter. What do you mean? Are you telling me Juliette has gone off with a stranger?"

Liselotte was pushing Sophie ahead of her into the tiny salon and rummaging in the desk in a corner in a state of great excitement. "But here is your letter, Frau Baronin, see, your very own writing."

Sophie took it from her and read it through uncomprehendingly. It looked like her writing, it was true, but to her eyes there were falsities which stood out clearly. She re-read it.

'Dear Fraulein Bredow,' it said. 'I am sending this letter by General Bresson's adjutant, Lt. Barré. He has instructions to bring Juliette to me in Vienna straight away. I am leaving with the General for Paris shortly and have no time to fetch her myself. I shall not require your services until we return in a month's time so enjoy a good holiday. Please pack all her clothes and arrange for her nursemaid to travel with her. Lt. Barré has all the necessary funds for the journey. My respects to yourself and your good father and many thanks for looking after Juliette so well all these months.'

There was her signature at the foot. Sophie let it drop from her shaking hands and cried out, "When did she leave?"

"Two days ago."

"Oh, God!" Sophie said in terror. "What has happened to her? What have you done, Liselotte?"

The governess was crying, great glistening tears rolled out of her eyes and down her fat cheeks. She seized a pile of letters from the desk. "I never dreamt it was not from you. Look, compare the handwritings, here is another letter from you. They look just the same, don't you agree, Frau Baronin?"

Sophie glanced at them dully. "What did this so-called adjutant look like, can you remember?"

"Oh, he was very handsome and very polite. He said such nice things about you, Frau Baronin, how beautiful you were and how charming. He made quite an impression on Juliette, too, though she was frightened of him at first with that great scar down his cheek. He explained that he had been wounded fighting at the Battle of Friedland."

"A scar?" Sophie felt a clutch of fear. "Which went from forehead to chin?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely, such a pity for so handsome a man."

"And he was tall, with very blue eyes?"

"Yes, yes," Liselotte nodded eagerly. "You know him well, I expect, Frau Baronin?"

"Was he wearing French uniform? Did he speak to you in French?"

"Oh, yes. So it is all right, it is just a misunderstanding?"

"No, it is not all right. Juliette has been abducted from under your very nose."

The governess gave a scream and fell on her knees in front of Sophie. "Please believe me, Frau Baronin, I thought the letter was from you. You know I would never let anything happen to Juliette. I love her as my own."

"No, it is not your fault, Liselotte," Sophie said unwillingly. "Get up, get up. What are we going to do now? Where is your father?"

"He is expected home in a moment, Frau Baronin. Perhaps he can think of something, he will know where to enquire, at any rate."

Sophie's head ached more than ever, so that her thoughts were muddled and she could think of nothing save the terrible reality that Juliette had been abducted by Friedrich. What was he planning to do with her? When Herr von Bredow came in he found his daughter, still slightly hysterical, trying to force the white-faced Sophie to drink some brandy. It took him at least quarter of an hour to sort out what they were telling him in dis-

jointed phrases and by that time it was well after midnight.

"Frau Baronin," he said kindly, "it is too late to make enquiries now. You are very tired. Let Liselotte help you to get to bed and I promise you that first thing in the morning I will go to the Hofrat."

Sophie assented because she knew he was right, but although she was very tired she could not sleep. She lay awake till daylight came, going over in her mind all the possible people she could contact to help her in her search. If only André had not been still in Vienna, he would have known at once what to do.

She was dressed and downstairs by first light, doing her best to swallow the coffee Liselotte forced on her and to nibble at a roll. Liselotte's father seemed to take an unconscionable time getting shaved and dressed in his best broadcloth coat preparatory to his interview with the Hofrat and Sophie fretted at the delay. At last he was ready, giving a final brush to his beaver hat and sending his daughter to fetch his gloves and Sophie stood up and fastened her pelisse.

At that moment there was a knock on the outer door and the maid ushered in a tall man wearing green spectacles and enveloped to the chin in a large black cloak. He swept off his hat and bowed, saying to Herr von Bredow, "May I speak to the Frau Baronin in private, sir?"

Herr von Bredow turned questioningly to Sophie and she nodded. When the stranger had checked that the door was firmly closed after the old man, he turned to Sophie, letting his cloak drop and taking off his spectacles. It was Friedrich.

Sophie cried out, "Where is Juliette? What have you done with her?"

Friedrich motioned her to be quiet. "Sit down, my dear Sophie," he said, "what I have to say to you will take a long time and we may as well be comfortable. Calm yourself on one count at least, Juliette is quite safe."

"Where is she? Why did you take her away?"

"I will say no more than that she is in a safe place. As to why I removed her I shall come to that in a moment."

Sophie stared at him and he smiled back at her pleasantly. "You have grown more beautiful than ever, my dear Sophie. The General is a lucky man. By the way, you must convey to him my congratulations on his promotion. He was decorated too, I believe?"

Sophie waved this away impatiently. "Please, don't waste time."

"Very well, I was only observing the conventions. Since I had the pleasure of seeing you in Tilsit I have followed your fortunes with great interest, very great interest, my dear Sophie. What a pity your child died, but then to be illegitimate is rather a handicap for a girl, don't you think?" He watched her face with a bright, assumed smile. His scar had contracted as it healed, lifting his mouth to one side so that he appeared to be sneering even when he was not and Sophie shivered. He laughed quietly and continued. "And then your brave Colonel rode away to fight yet another battle. Insatiable for glory, these Frenchmen. What a mercy he did not die of his wounds at Eckmühl or you might have found yourself on your own once more. And now he is a General! I understand Marshal Davout, or I believe I should say the Prince of Eckmühl, thinks very highly of his abilities."

Sophie did not answer, but she clenched her hands tightly in her lap.

"Now, my dear Sophie, I come to the point. I belong to a society which has been formed to combat Bonaparte, to revenge the insults he has piled on us. We are dedicated to overthrowing him and restoring Prussia to her rightful place among the other great states. We call ourselves the Tugenbund or the League of Virtue. You won't have heard of us, we are a secret society. But although we operate in the dark the time will come when we shall operate openly and then the French may

beware." His blue eyes shone with fervour and he paused for a moment. "You, my dear Sophie, have only one wish, I imagine, and that is to free yourself from your marriage with my dear brother, so as to enable you to marry your General. I can't say I blame you, to be married to such a boor, even though he is my brother, is an unenviable position to be in, but the fact remains that legally you are still tied to him and that Juliette is his daughter. Now, Ludwig is, blessed shall I say?" he raised his eyebrows and gave a jarring laugh, "with an insatiable sexual appetite. Aha!" he said as he saw Sophie's involuntary wince, "You know what I mean, I can see. Since you left he has satisfied himself with his peasant girls, much as he did before you married him, but these gross, evil-smelling country girls are not altogether to his taste, even if they are scrubbed before they are brought to him. Having been married to you," and he let his eyes drop to Sophie's figure suggestively, "he now yearns for more well-bred pleasures, as well as for a legitimate son. He could be persuaded to grant you a divorce and to give you legal custody of your daughter—for a price, for a price." And he paused to let his words sink in.

Sophie, who had been following him closely, said without much hope, "And that price is?"

"Nothing very arduous, my dear Sophie, I assure you, nothing beyond your powers."

"Well?"

"That you should supply us with regular information about the state of the French troops under Marshal Davout and get the answers to any other questions we might need information about." He crossed his fingers together blandly and looked at Sophie with his piercing blue eyes.

Sophie, whose heart had lifted very slightly at the thought of a divorce, put her hands to her face and shook her head slowly and sadly. "Quite impossible."

"Oh, come, my dear Sophie, what possible harm can it do, just a few figures, a few innocuous pieces of in-

formation which you can easily get from the handsome General, who is the Marshal's right-hand man."

"I should be a spy."

"Harsh words, my dear Sophie, and not altogether true. Besides, your own mother was not above collecting information for M. Talleyrand when she was the Prince's mistress. Admittedly you have not done as well as your mother, only a General and a shopkeeper's son at that, but times have changed."

"You seem to know a great deal about my mother, Monsieur," Sophie said angrily.

"I have made it my business to enquire into your past as well as your present."

"But you still have not told me where Juliette is?"

"Ah, Juliette, what a sweet child she is, I have grown quite fond of her. Her father is most anxious to see her again, I'm sure you recollect how devoted he was to her?"

Sophie did her best to conceal the fear which had leapt into her eyes at this last sentence, but Friedrich was watching her closely and sighed with satisfaction. "Why do you take it upon yourself to meddle in what are surely Ludwig's personal affairs?"

"As you no doubt know, Ludwig's brain works slowly and he finds it difficult to express himself diplomatically. When I offered to interview you for him he was happy to leave it in my hands entirely."

"You can't be so cruel as to take Juliette away from me?"

"I am doing nothing illegal. And you yourself once said I should have respect for my family honour," Friedrich reminded her triumphantly and Sophie clasped her hands together and shut her eyes.

"I can't agree," she said faintly.

"Very well then." Friedrich rose. "I will return your daughter to her father."

"Oh, please," Sophie clutched his arm, "don't go yet. Is there no alternative?"

"None," he said firmly, looking down at her with a

curious mixture of cruel pleasure and pity, which she fortunately did not see.

"And if I agree?"

"Then I shall return Juliette to you by this evening."

"She is not very far away then?" Sophie weighed the chances of getting assistance to find her daughter before it was too late, but she knew that legally she was on unsure ground and after a minute she went on, "How do you know that I can supply you with the facts you need? The General would never answer specific questions about military matters or allow me to go through his papers."

"You are very intelligent, my dear Sophie, and you can't tell me that he never discusses his work with you. If you are determined enough you will find it easy to get the information I want, I am not asking for anything very complicated."

"Oh, I can't do it, I can't do it!" Sophie's eyes filled with tears. "Have you no pity?"

"None whatsoever. If you can't do it, then I will leave immediately. Good-bye."

"No, please, stay a minute longer. Give me time to think."

"I will give you ten minutes, no more." He stood by the window, looking out at the passers-by, while Sophie paced up and down, her thoughts in complete disorder. She could think of nothing clearly except Juliette, whom she had abandoned for three whole months while she nursed André and whom she might now never see again. Would it be so very difficult to get the information Friedrich wanted? If she pretended to agree and got Juliette back she could fob Friedrich off with imaginary figures or tell him she found it impossible to learn the true facts. He would never dare to abduct Juliette when she was under the protection of the French army.

Friedrich turned round, snapping shut his watch. "Time is up, my dear Sophie, what have you decided?"

"I agree."

"Well done. I am glad you have decided to be sensible. We shall make it as easy as possible for you. But if you should decide to deceive us once you have got Juliette back I can assure you that she will not be safe, even under the roof of a French General. Even the French will hesitate to deprive a father of his legitimate child."

"What am I to do?" Sophie whispered, frightened that he could read her thoughts so easily.

"I shall get in touch with you once you have settled in Hamburg and give you your instructions then."

"And Juliette?"

"She will be with you again in just over an hour." So she must still be in Weimar or its vicinity, Sophie thought.

When Friedrich had left Liselotte came running in. "Any news?" she cried. "What do you wish my father to do?"

"Juliette is being returned here almost immediately," Sophie said unwillingly and when Liselotte exclaimed and wanted to know the why's and wherefores, Sophie turned such a blank face of misery to her that the governess faltered and backed out of the room apologetically.

Juliette came running in with her nursemaid, clutching an enormous doll, punctually to the minute an hour later and displayed no particular interest at the sight of her mother, waiting impatiently for her return. In fact she stared at her shyly and tried to wriggle away when Sophie hugged and kissed her with exaggerated relief.

"Darling Juliette, how are you? Mama has missed you so much. Have you been a good girl while I have been away?"

"Mm," said Juliette in a bored voice. "Can I show Fraulein my new doll?"

Sophie let her go sadly, realising that she had become a stranger to her daughter and that Juliette was more at ease with her governess, to whom she chattered gaily about the fine time she had had with her new-found Uncle Friedrich. Not even the fur-lined cloak and dolls'

clothes which Sophie had brought for her from Vienna could persuade her to unbend and Sophie, whose head ached fiercely went away upstairs to lie down. The next morning Sophie swore Liselotte to secrecy about Juliette's temporary disappearance, telling her some very involved story about her husband's relatives which the governess could not understand, but accepted all the same. In any case she was too much in awe of André to tattle about it.

For the first few weeks of her reunion with André in Hamburg Sophie put to the back of her mind the bargain she had struck for the price of her own and Juliette's freedom. André was delighted to see her and embraced her lovingly, but his pleasure did not extend to the sight of Juliette. He patted her absently on the head and produced some bon-bons from his pocket in an offhand way, then told her to run away and play. And a few days later catching Juliette cutting into pretty patterns some important letters he had left lying about he had lost his temper completely with her, storming into Sophie and shouting, "Either you keep that child under control or she will have to be sent away." He apologised almost immediately on seeing Sophie's distress, but his anger did not make it any easier for Sophie to confide in him and ask for his advice and help.

Now that André was a General they lived in greater state than before on two floors of a large mansion overlooking the Alster and Sophie had to accustom herself to the continual presence of one or other of his A.D.C.s. One of them, who had brought her the news of André's promotion in Vienna, she liked very much. He was an unspoilt friendly boy with a delightful sense of humour and he was more than a little in love with his General's mistress, as were one or two of the others. But the principal A.D.C., a Major Labiche, with thinning fair hair, thin precise lips and cold green eyes, detested her and she him with an equal intensity. He was an extremely methodical and intelligent man, absolutely invaluable to André in the compilation of facts and

figures, all of which he had at his fingertips, although he was incapable of taking bold decisions on his own and his zeal for rules and regulations annoyed everyone, including André himself. André worked late in his study on the first floor most evenings these days, but Sophie had permission to come downstairs to interrupt him at eight o'clock and on the evenings when his young lieutenants were on duty she was greeted with smiles and compliments, and André himself, laying aside his papers, would run his fingers through his dark curly hair and put his arm round her familiarly in front of them, calling her 'ma chérie' and teasing her for making him forsake the path of duty. On the evenings when Major Labiche was on duty, however, he would answer her knock with a curt, "The General has not finished yet, Madame. If you like I will inform him that you are waiting," and if André, hearing her voice, called out, "Let her come in, Major. I've done enough for tonight," he would sniff disapprovingly and detain André a little longer by recalling urgent unfinished business.

Sophie, after two and a half weeks had gone by with no word from Friedrich, had begun to hope that she would be left in peace when one morning she received a visit from a slight young man, ostensibly wishing for a position as piano teacher to herself and her daughter. Sophie was about to dismiss him kindly when he, glancing round furtively to make absolutely certain they were not overheard, said in a low voice, "I come from Baron von Frankenberg, Madame. I am to be your intermediary. I should advise you, in your own interests, to engage me to visit you at least once a week."

Sophie, turning very pale, looked at him more closely. He was a most unlikely looking spy. He had a mass of unruly brown hair, hollow cheeks, soft brown eyes with long lashes, full red lips and very white, delicate looking hands like a girl's. Though his clothes were shabby, they were of good cut and an expensive air and his linen was very clean. Only his determined chin and thin, muscular

body showed that he might be something more than the effeminate young piano teacher he claimed to be.

"What proof have I that you come from the Baron, Monsieur?" Sophie asked.

"This, Madame," he said, producing a letter sealed with the Frankenberg coat of arms. Sophie tore it open and read:

This is to introduce Johann von Rauch who under the guise of playing duets with you will act as courier between us. My brother has agreed to set in motion proceedings for a divorce, but only on receipt of enough valuable information from you to prove your own good faith. Herr von Rauch may look frail, but he is one of the best shots I know and a fanatical member of the Tugenbund. He would stop at nothing to further our aims, not even abducting your daughter again from under the noses of the French, so be warned, my dear Sophie.

It was signed with a flourish 'Friedrich von Frankenberg'.

Sophie still holding the letter lightly in her hands looked up at the young man. "You acknowledge my bonafides, Madame?" he asked, examining her closely in his turn.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Very well, then you will need this no longer. It would be dangerous to leave it lying around." He lifted the letter from her hands and threw it on the fire, bending over it to make quite sure every last piece was consumed. Then he straightened up once more and smiled at Sophie. It was not a pleasant smile, it was unmistakably menacing and Sophie shivered in spite of the warmth of the room.

"Would you like me to play something for you, Madame? I can assure you that my ability as a teacher is not a subterfuge."

He went over to the piano in the corner of the long salon and, after running his fingers up and down the keys lightly, launched into a gay sparkling melody with the greatest assurance and expertise. Sophie, in spite of herself, was quite captivated and the young man, glancing up at her, as the main theme gathered strength and brilliance under his fingers, said, "Ah, you agree then that I might be able to teach you something, Madame?"

When he had finished he let his hands rest on his lap for a moment, giving a deep sigh, then he stood up abruptly and came round to Sophie. "I shall come again in a week's time, Madame. Would the morning be most convenient for you? It is all the same to me."

"Yes, the morning."

"And here is what the Baron wishes you to find out before then." He unfolded a small piece of paper from his pocket and gave it to Sophie, who took it from him with shaking fingers. She read it through and then shook her head rapidly. "I don't know how I shall do it, it's too much to ask of me, Monsieur."

"Nothing is impossible when the fate of your daughter is at stake, Madame. I advise you to do your best before I come next week. And don't forget that if this paper should fall into the wrong hands we are all liable to be shot." And he bowed gracefully and withdrew, leaving Sophie standing in the middle of the salon, frozen with terror at the thought of the task before her.

In actual fact the answers to Friedrich's questions proved easier to obtain than Sophie had feared. After three sleepless nights, and days spent in fruitless worrying about ways and means, which left her pale and exhausted, Sophie learnt the answers from André's own lips and from the papers lying on the desk in his study. André was used in the evenings to thinking aloud, stretched out comfortably in his chair, a glass of brandy in his hand, even, perhaps, boasting a little to his mistress, while Sophie sewed and encouraged him placidly at infrequent intervals with, "Yes, André, and so what will you do?" Up to the present she had let it all flow

over her without taking very much notice. But now she asked questions, quite pertinent ones, until André said teasingly, after a sharp look at her, "My dearest Sophie, you are becoming quite a military expert. Have you secret ambitions to belong to my staff?"

Sophie felt herself colouring and was momentarily at a loss for a reply, then she recovered her aplomb. "Don't you think I would make a decorative addition to it?" she asked, smiling at him, and André leant over and caressed her with lazy amorousness. "I prefer you to be with me in my off-duty hours, *chérie*."

"Dearest André," Sophie replied softly, pushing away from her the nagging thought of her disloyalty. The details demanded of her did not seem very earth-shaking, she could not believe the Empire would be wrecked because of them.

When Herr von Rauch arrived punctually on the morning appointed Sophie received him with outward calm and they sat down immediately to play a duet. Sophie found that he was, as he had said, an inspiring teacher and she found herself enjoying with few qualms the hour they spent together. Only when he had finished and was folding up the sheets of music, did he say quietly to Sophie, "Well, have you got what I need?"

Sophie produced her small piece of paper, which he tucked away in his jacket after glancing at it comprehensively and nodding his head approvingly. "Very good, Madame, you have done well. Here is next week's assignment." Thus easily was the exchange carried out and Sophie breathed freely for a minute or two. In the middle of last night, lying beside the sleeping André, she had imagined the moment of handing over being interrupted by a squad of soldiers, marching in with heavy tread to lead them both away to execution.

"Next week at the same time then," said the young man, bowing respectfully.

As a matter of fact Herr von Rauch became quite fashionable amongst the wives of the French garrison and was in great demand both as a teacher and an accom-

panist, André had been responsible for that. He had come in unexpectedly at the start of one of Sophie's lessons and had been so impressed that he had spoken of him to the other officers until his fame had spread to their wives and daughters. Although Sophie had told André about the young man coming to give her practice she could not restrain a terrified start when he entered the room and her hands faltered and stopped short on the keys. Herr von Rauch rose and bowed low, but André, acknowledging him with a careless wave of his hand, said, "No, continue, continue. I was on my way out, but the sound of your duet decided me to make a detour."

Herr von Rauch re-seated himself and they started to play again and, although Sophie's heart was pounding alarmingly, she acquitted herself quite well. "Bravo, bravo," André said at the end. "I must hear more some other time."

Sophie did not always find it easy to elicit the information required by Friedrich and as time went on the questions became harder to answer. The strain began to tell on her quite soon, she grew pale and thin with dark shadows under her eyes and, if André had not been so pre-occupied with his duties, he would have seen for himself how nervous she had become. She kept an exaggerated watch over Juliette, constantly going to the nursery at odd hours to reassure herself as to her presence and suffering greatly should Juliette go out with her governess on her own. Always on her return from some outing with André she would run to the child's room to make sure she was there and this never failed to annoy André. "Great heavens!" he would scoff, "you make altogether too much fuss over that child. No wonder she has become a spoilt brat, she gets everything her own way."

Sophie did not reply to these gibes, how could she? She had to acknowledge the truth of it, but she often asked herself how long this torture must continue, had she not done enough by now to secure her freedom?

Each time she asked this same question through the intermediary of Herr von Rauch she received an evasive answer of, "next month, perhaps," which began to make her fear she was trapped irretrievably in a web of deceit of her own making. How often waking suddenly in the dead hours of morning, with André breathing deeply and peacefully alongside her, she had struggled to keep back her tears and wonder if it was all worthwhile. There were times when she longed to wake André and pour out all her misery to him, to have him soothe away her fears, but each time she hesitated at the last moment, realising she had become too deeply involved to withdraw and that she must remain silent until eventually her husband set her free, as Friedrich had promised, and she could marry André and be happy and at peace once more.

With weeks passing without the slightest sign of any suspicion falling on her or her fellow-conspirators, Sophie grew somewhat bolder and more careless. One evening when André had been called unexpectedly to the Marshal after dinner, she took the opportunity to go downstairs to his study to see if she could look through his papers. The long corridors and stone stairs were dark and shadowy and Sophie's small candle lit up vague shapes which made her hurry past, cold with fear lest one of them should stand up to challenge her. The soldiers, normally on duty at the foot of the staircase in the hall, were playing cards in a small ante-room behind a half-closed door and the only sounds were the soft swish of her silk dress, the faint shuffle of her slippers on the polished tile floor and the distant laughing and talking of the soldiers. She tried the door to the study carefully, it was locked as she had thought it would be, but she had been provided with a skeleton key by Herr von Rauch and she unlocked it silently and went in to set her candle down on André's large mahogany desk. His papers were all in tidy piles on the top, neatly catalogued by Major Labiche, but the one she wanted must have been at the bottom of a pile, for despite a rapid search

she did not come across it. She sat down at the desk, deciding to go through the papers one by one, and as she did so her eye was caught by a small miniature of herself which André kept there. She picked it up and studied it, thinking as she did so how she longed to give up this furtive scuffling through papers, the appropriate question asked casually in a disinterested voice and answered only too explicitly by the unsuspecting André. Herr von Rauch had held out more hope at last week's meeting that her mission was nearly concluded. He had flourished a letter from her husband which showed that the divorce action was being set in motion at last and Sophie prayed that it was so.

She put the miniature down again with a heavy sigh and started to go through the piles with close attention. Her ears were attuned at the same time to the least unusual noise from the corridor outside, but gradually as nothing untoward could be heard, she relaxed her her wariness and concentrated more on the task in hand. So it was with a sense of shock that she heard the sound of footsteps coming quietly down the corridor, a very faint jingle of spurs showing it was not the men on duty but more probably one of André's A.D.C.s, or even André himself. With trembling hands Sophie straightened the papers and stood up from behind the desk. Her eyes went to the heavy curtains at the windows and, blowing out the candle quickly but leaving it on the desk in her haste, she moved with the utmost speed and silence behind them. The door was unlocked and someone entered, someone holding a light for the faint glow from it penetrated Sophie's hiding place. To her her breathing sounded loud and laboured and she took small shallow breaths in an agony of suspense. The person in the room gave a familiar small dry cough and cleared his throat and Sophie knew it was Major Labiche. If he should discover her presence she could expect no mercy and Sophie shrank back closer against the cold glass of the window. The Major was shuffling through the papers on the desk, then there was the sound of a

key turning and the opening of a drawer, more shuffling, then a long silence which to Sophie was more frightening than anything else as her imagination supplied her with pictures of the Major hearing her breathing and creeping up to her hiding place to fling the curtain open with a loud cry of "Traitor! Spy!"

But after a while there was the sound of a chair being scraped back against the floor and then, after a short interval, the noise of a pen scratching rapidly on paper. Sophie, her knees trembling with fear and cold, visualised the Major sitting there half the night writing and annotating. Suppose André were to return and find her absent while she was hidden in here? Suppose she sneezed or coughed or fainted? After half an hour the Major rose and paced to and fro just in front of the window. Each time his spurs clicked as he turned Sophie wondered if he would draw the curtains aside to look out of the window and she only dared to breathe when he was farthest from her. Suddenly he stopped pacing and made a disapproving noise with his tongue against his teeth. She heard him going towards the desk again, but could not diagnose his movements until with sharp suddenness he went hurriedly to the door and shouted, "Sergeant Lebrun," and Sophie heard the heavy movements of the sergeant running down the corridor. "M. le Major," he cried, clicking his heels together.

"Where did this candle come from on the General's desk? See, the wax is still soft. Has someone been in here tonight?"

"No, no one except yourself, Major," the sergeant replied respectfully.

"And are you sure you and your men were on guard all the time, Sergeant? No playing cards snugly round the fire while the General was out?" The Major's voice was cold and hostile and the sergeant when he replied put on a note of injured innocence which would have made Sophie laugh if she had not been so frightened. "On my honour, Major, someone has been on guard all the time."

"Hm," said the Major disbelievingly. "Well, there is nowhere anyone could hide in here, except behind these curtains," and he came up close to them, giving them a faint push with his hand. "Well, there must be some explanation." They both moved away towards the door, talking in low voices and Sophie felt her heartbeat slowing down mercifully to a more normal pace. The door was closed and locked and the sound of their footsteps in the corridor got fainter and fainter.

Even when all sounds had ceased Sophie did not dare to move. She pressed her head against the cold glass of the window and thought desperately, "I dare not leave the study yet, the staircase will be closely guarded after the Major's reprimand. Oh, God! What am I to do? What will André say if he returns and finds me missing? I can't go on with this any longer." She started to cry helplessly, shaking with cold and fright. Only after she heard the clocks in the town striking one did she venture to come out from her hiding place and open the locked door with her skeleton key, listening all the while for the least sound in the corridor outside. She dared not take the candle and groped her way along the dark passage and up the stairs until she reached the safety of her own apartment. There she undressed hurriedly and climbed into bed, her teeth chattering and her body shaking. Either André had not yet returned or else, thinking she was already in bed, had gone to his own room.

When Sophie woke in the morning after dozing restlessly for what remained of the night, she felt too ill to get up and as the day wore on she grew more and more flushed, her throat aching painfully and her eyes swollen and red. Her maid was anxious to call a doctor and when Sophie refused, shook her head and spoke darkly of dangerous fevers. André came to see her late in the afternoon, by which time Sophie's voice had been reduced to a croak. He sat down on her bed and held her hand, looking with concern at her burning cheeks. "What is it, chérie? Have you got a cold? My mother

used to give me a tisane for colds, I wish I could remember the recipe."

Sophie felt weak tears stinging behind her eyelids. "Don't come too near me, André," she managed to get out. She felt she could not bear his loving concern, if he only knew what had caused her fever he would probably never touch her again. She resolved there and then that she would refuse to go on spying, come what may, the cost was too high.

"Dearest, are you in pain? Don't cry, Sophie ma chérie. I'll send for a doctor at once." He stood up and tugged at the bell rope and when her maid came gave her instructions in a low voice. When he came back to the bedside Sophie was shivering violently and he took her in his arms, wrapping a shawl round her as tenderly as a nursemaid with a child.

"Oh, André, I don't want you to leave me," Sophie sobbed, half-delirious.

"Who said I would leave you? Sh, dearest, you must not excite yourself."

Sophie was in bed for over a week and during that time André spent as many hours as he could spare from the exacting Marshal Davout to be with her. Sophie was very quiet once her fever had subsided. She lay in bed, her beautiful eyes always on André, holding his hand almost despairingly all the time he was there, and when he had gone going over and over in her mind the phrases she would use to Herr von Rauch when next he came to see her.

They had missed three lessons owing to her illness and when she was able to receive him again he was impatient to get down to business at once. Sophie stood by the piano, striking chords idly with one hand, telling him what he needed to know as rapidly as possible for she was eager to get to the subject uppermost in her mind.

"I can't go on any longer, Herr von Rauch," she told him eventually, facing him bravely when, with his eyes flashing angrily, he cried, "Impossible, you can't give up now."

"I must, I must," Sophie insisted. She described to him how she had almost got caught in the study and he listened impatiently, his arms crossed.

"You have grown careless, that is all. Think what is at stake, Madame, your daughter's life itself."

"What do you mean, her life?"

"I mean her continued presence with you, of course," he said smoothly and hastily, but Sophie was alarmed by the look she had seen in his eyes. From what she had learnt of him during these months she knew he was a true fanatic and would stop at nothing to gain his ends. He saw her alarm and followed up his advantage, gripping her wrist painfully. "If you give up, Madame, I cannot answer for the consequences."

"You've tricked me," Sophie whispered, "in the beginning it was only till my husband agreed to a divorce. Now you threaten me with worse, is there no end to it?"

"Not while you are useful to us, Madame." He stood over her triumphantly and Sophie shuddered. "Come," he continued, "time for our lesson. Someone will notice if they don't hear the piano soon. Shall we have the Mozart, Madame?"

"I can't, I can't," Sophie said, walking away to the window. He sat down at the piano, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, and commenced to play, dazzlingly, brilliantly, while Sophie stared out of the window blindly and wondered how she would ever extricate herself from this quicksand, this morass of treachery. When the hour was up Herr von Rauch rose from the piano and came over to Sophie. "Remember what I told you, Madame. I will give you a week to think it over, but you had better think very carefully, very carefully indeed." He bent down and seized her limp hand, kissing it with exaggerated politeness and then bowed himself out. Sophie stayed by the window, watching for him as he came down the front steps and turned jauntily away up the road, walking with quick, short strides like a man in a hurry for an assignment. If only he would drop down dead, Sophie thought, if only he would never come back.

She had plenty of time in the next week to think and think endlessly for André was away on a trip of inspection. She lay awake night after night, gnawing her nails to the quick in an agony of discarded plans. By the time Herr von Rauch was due to visit her again she still had not come to any definite conclusion. Juliette had been ill for two of those days and as Sophie nursed and cosseted her she knew that her daughter was too precious for her to become a pawn in a game. Perhaps, after all these months, her wisest course was to confess everything to André and hope that he could understand and extricate her somehow, but she dreaded his reactions.

On the morning that Herr von Rauch was due to come again Sophie sat on a sofa twisting her hands nervously in her lap. When the door opened she looked up, expecting to see his familiar figure being ushered in, and was surprised instead to see André.

She stood up eagerly. "Have you just got back? I didn't expect you till this evening, *chérie*?" She went towards him but André, grim-faced, put up his hand and rapped out at her, "Were you expecting Herr von Rauch?"

"I was, yes," Sophie faltered.

"Then you will be interested to know that he was arrested two days ago."

"Thank God," Sophie said very quietly, but André did not hear her. "During the two days he has been in our custody he has not been very informative, but his interrogators have learnt one thing, the name of his accomplice."

"André, please let me explain."

His face was pale and cold with rage. "What possible explanation is there for treachery?"

Sophie's heart jumped a beat, André looked so angry, would he ever understand her explanations? "It was Friedrich, he kidnapped Juliette when she was in Weimar with Liselotte and her father, and threatened to take her back to Ludwig unless I did as he asked. Herr von Rauch was only a go-between."

"My God, Sophie, do you realise what you have been

doing? Betraying the secrets of your own country to people who you knew were enemies of that country."

"I know, I know," Sophie sobbed, "but I had no choice. Friedrich threatened to take Juliette away, Ludwig has a legal right to her. I never dreamt they would make me go on and on once I had started. I thought they only wanted a few unimportant details."

"I thought it strange at first when you asked me, oh, so innocently, about military matters, you used not to be interested. You tricked me with your beautiful guileless eyes. You betrayed my trust in you. What do you think I feel knowing that everyone round the Marshal believes me a fool and a traitor for disclosing these secrets to my mistress?"

"André, I hated to do it, but once I started I was trapped."

"Why start at all? Why didn't you tell me everything?"

"Because." Sophie hesitated, then said in a rush, "Because I knew you didn't care for Juliette, that you would have been glad to see her go back to her father."

André swore and walked away to the window, leaning his head against the glass. "I don't suppose it matters to you that I am now under the threat of a court martial."

"Oh, André, no. What will happen?"

"I shall be disgraced, that is all, it's an end to everything I've worked for."

"Oh, no, André, but you were entirely innocent."

"You and I know I was innocent, but I talked too freely, something quite unforgivable to the Marshal. Oh, God! Sophie, how could you? I trusted you completely." His voice was hoarse and Sophie could hardly see him through her own tears.

"Let me go to the Marshal," she said at last. "Let me explain how I tricked you."

"You will have every opportunity to speak to the Marshal," he said grimly, turning round. "I have orders to arrest you, Sophie."

She drew in her breath sharply. "What will happen?"

"You will probably be shot with your fellow conspirators." In his anger at her stupidity he had meant to frighten her and he succeeded. Her lips turned pale and she clutched at the nearest chair. "Oh, André, I wish it had never happened. I've been so unhappy, deceiving you all these months."

"How could you be such a fool, Sophie? I can't help you now, it has all been taken out of my hands. I only learnt of von Rauch's arrest on my return early this morning. I can't disobey the Marshal's orders to arrest you. I have told Major Labiche to escort you to headquarters for questioning in five minutes from now. I won't be seeing you again myself."

She heard his words with a stab of acute pain. "Oh, André," she cried, "please, André, don't leave me alone."

"It's all over, Sophie, I can never see you again. Everything is finished between us." He left the room abruptly and passed Major Labiche coming up the stairs with a squad of soldiers, a satisfied half-smirk on his lips. He saluted André smartly, but André did not acknowledge it. He walked blindly past them all, his sword hitting the stairs sharply, and went out into the street where his carriage was waiting.

1812

SOPHIE WAS walking in the park of the small château in Tourraine, melancholy with autumn mists and fallen leaves, while the children ran ahead with their dogs, when Stephanie de Briancourt came out to meet them.

"Brrh!" she said, taking Sophie's arm affectionately,

"this cold damp is getting in my bones. Are you sure you are wrapped up warmly enough, ma chérie?"

"I must admit I shivered when I first came out, but I have been running with the children and now I don't feel cold at all."

Stephanie looked at Sophie's rosy cheeks and bright eyes with pleasure. "You look so much better, ma chère, the country air is doing you good."

"Yes, it is, all thanks to you and Lucien for having me down here."

"You know we love to have you, besides Juliette and my Delphine are such good friends." They both looked towards the two little girls who, with their fair hair flying loose, were throwing sticks for the dogs to chase.

"I came out to tell you that we are having some unexpected visitors to dinner, chérie, near neighbours of ours, M. and Mme. de Couillet and their children, including their eldest son who has just come back from Spain. I don't believe you know them."

Sophie's heart gave a little jump when Spain was mentioned. Ever since she had read in *Le Moniteur* that André had gone to Spain to serve under Marshal Marmont she had hoped to meet someone who might have news of him.

"Is the son in the army?" she asked lightly and Stephanie, giving her a quick sidelong glance, said, "Yes, he is A.D.C. to some General, I forget his name, who is staying with them now. Let's go indoors, chérie, it's growing colder and you must help me with the arrangements."

Sophie and Stephanie had been at school together and had corresponded intermittently since then, although their letters had grown fewer and fewer as their interests grew apart. When Sophie, after weeks of interrogation, had ultimately been released, the Marshal's wife, who had also been at Mme. Campan's, had taken pity on her and pleaded for her to be allowed to return to France. Stephanie's husband who was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dealt with Sophie's case and mentioned the affair

to his wife, who had written immediately offering to help. Sophie was allowed a passport in order to return to France with her daughter, but was refused permission to live in Paris itself, so that she was grateful when Stephanie arranged lodgings for her in the country with an old nurse of hers. Here Sophie and Juliette lived quietly, Sophie eking out what money she had by giving German and music lessons to more well-to-do neighbours. If it had not been for the necessity of looking after her daughter Sophie would have ceased to care if she lived or died. Even if she coped bravely with the business of earning some sort of living for them and keeping Juliette happy and well cared for, she had abandoned all hope of future happiness for herself. André had kept his promise never to see her again and if he had been court martialled she had never heard the outcome. When she next learnt of his doings through *Le Moniteur* he had been transferred to Dalmatia with his rank unchanged, and from there to Spain. Even when she learnt eventually that her husband had divorced her and allowed her to have custody of Juliette, she could raise no more than a rueful smile, it had all happened too late to be of the slightest consequence.

Stephanie had been kept in Paris all this time by a difficult pregnancy and confinement, so it was not until after the long cold winter of 1811 that she was able to visit Sophie. She was appalled when she did come at Sophie's precarious state of health, for she had stinted herself of nourishing foods in order to keep Juliette well fed. In spite of the police prohibition, Stephanie had taken them back to Paris with her at once, and M. de Briancourt had interceded with the Foreign Minister to reconsider Sophie's case. In examining the relevant documents the official responsible had unearthed the receipts for the money paid to Sophie's mother, which had been lying in a bank all this time, accumulating interest. Sophie found herself in possession of an adequate income of her own at last and had no feeling of accepting char-

ity when Stephanie suggested she live with them and let Juliette share her daughters' governess.

Stephanie had grown from a small, fair-haired girl into a tall fair-haired woman with few pretensions to beauty, apart from a graceful figure and walk, but she had such vivacity that one forgot her plainness after a few minutes in her company and she had a wide circle of devoted admirers. She adored managing her friends' lives and Sophie could have found no one better equipped to take her in hand and persuade her to accept an existence which excluded André. Once Sophie had regained her health Stephanie had made great efforts to introduce her to various eligible young men, and even older widowers, and she was distressed when Sophie politely ignored all their overtures.

"But, chérie," she said, "would you not be far happier settled with a husband? You cannot hope to provide Juliette with all the advantages she should have without a father and you must think of your own future. You are young, you can't mourn André forever."

Sophie shook her head obstinately. She had told Stephanie something of her life story when she had been at her lowest ebb and it had been a relief to pour it out to a sympathetic listener. "I can't love anyone ever again. I gave André my whole heart and now there is nothing, absolutely nothing left for anyone else. What use would I be as a wife to anyone?"

Stephanie made a face. "In another year or two you will feel differently. No one's heart stays broken for ever, we may have thought that when we were at school when we were young, silly and romantic dreamers—remember how we wept over *The Sorrows of Werther*?—but now we are grown up and know that real life is different and no one dies of love or a broken heart." Stephanie was inclined to blame André for abandoning Sophie to her fate, although Sophie herself maintained that he was entirely justified under the circumstances. "Marry some sensible, kindly man with an adequate fortune and settle down with him."

Stephanie came in as Sophie was dressing for dinner two hours later, they dined early in the country, and stood behind her looking at her critically. "I am glad you put on that new velvet dress, *chérie*," she said, "the colour suits you remarkably well. How are you going to have your hair done tonight?"

Sophie glanced at her suspiciously in the mirror, Stephanie had an air of suppressed excitement, which she associated with her attempts to arrange a suitable marriage. Surely no one could be coming this evening, perhaps she had in mind the son recently returned from Spain?

"Really, Stephanie, anyone would think I was a young girl of sixteen, instead of nearly middle-aged, the way you worry about my appearance."

"Middle-aged at twenty-four! Sophie dearest, I don't feel nearly middle-aged and yet I am the same age as you exactly."

Sophie laughed. "I was only teasing, but with our daughters aged seven already, we are no longer young, you must admit."

"I admit nothing of the sort. Sophie, you wretch, you've spoilt my day. I shall imagine wrinkles and grey hair creeping up on me all evening long and worry about Lucien paying too much attention to that sweet little *de Couillet* girl. Oh, well! come down as soon as you're ready, Sophie."

Sophie found the carriages with the visitors arriving just as she reached the foot of the stairs and was drawn forward by Stephanie and her husband to be introduced to Monsieur and Madame and their two daughters, one of whom, Louise, was, as Stephanie had said, a most attractive young girl of sixteen, who blushed to the tips of her pretty little ears at Lucien's exaggerated compliments. Sophie was just exchanging a secret smile with Stephanie over this when the rest of the party came up the steps into the hall, their progress having been impeded by the fact that one of them was on crutches. When Sophie saw who it was the blood drained from

her face and she would have fainted had not Mme. de Couillet been holding her by the arm.

"I don't think, dear Mme. de Briancourt, you have met my eldest son, Victor, yet. And this is General Bresson, whose A.D.C. he is, who has been staying with us while he recuperates from his wounds. General, my good friends and neighbours, M. and Mme. de Briancourt and Mme. la Baronne—I am sorry," she said, turning to Sophie, "but these German names always defeat me."

But Sophie was staring at André and did not hear a word. André after bowing as best he could to Stephanie and Lucien, gave Sophie a frozen flick of a smile and said, "Mme. la Baronne and I are already acquainted."

The party moved slowly into the salon on a tide of talk, Sophie drawn along with them by the mere fact of being in the middle of the group and carried forward by their momentum. André was disposed carefully on a sofa by his solicitous hostess and young A.D.C. and Sophie sat down unseeingly on a chair in a dark corner, hearing not one word of the general conversation for she was staring, paralysed with shock, at André. She had registered with pity and an acute sense of distress that he was on crutches because his left foot was missing, but as well as that his face had grown older and harder, ravaged by deep lines running from his nose to the corners of his mouth, his dark, curly hair flecked with grey. Only his eyes were the same, bright and intelligent, and very obviously avoiding hers.

When they went in to dinner André was seated next to Stephanie at the other end of the table to Sophie. At first the conversation was casual and light, the de Couillets busy retailing items of local gossip which left André and Sophie isolated in silence for the time being. Sophie kept her eyes on her plate while she made valiant efforts to force down a few mouthfuls, each one of which she felt would choke her. She wished she could excuse herself altogether from the table, but it would have appeared extraordinarily rude. Stephanie and Mme. de

Couillet had clearly planned this encounter with the best of intentions. Sophie's cheeks flushed when she remembered the casual way Stephanie had mentioned that Victor was A.D.C. to some General, whose name she had forgotten. André, judging by the way his face had stiffened when he recognised her, had not known about her presence beforehand either. It was proving an embarrassment to both of them and she longed for the end of the evening.

The conversation soon turned, as it tended to these days, to the war, or wars rather, in Spain and Russia. Lucien called deferentially down the table to André, "What fresh news have you heard of the Emperor's advance into Russia, General?"

"Why, no more than you have read yourself, Monsieur," André replied rather shortly, rousing himself from his silence.

"But after our great victory at Moskova we surely have no more to fear from the Russian army," Lucien said. "I heard this morning that our outposts have reached Moscow, the Czar will surely sue for peace now?"

"The Russians are not so easily beaten, as I know to my cost," André said sombrely. "Our losses were as high as theirs at Moskova and since then they have avoided open conflict, withdrawing further and further into the interior. The Emperor's lines of communication are fully stretched and with the winter coming he may find himself in a difficult position."

"But look at the vast army he has assembled to invade Russia."

"And how few of them can be depended upon to fight in a tight corner. The army is made up of our allies, there are very few Frenchman, and too many of those allies are only looking for the first opportunity to desert to the other side. The Emperor should have finished the English off in Spain first before invading Russia, and the English blockade of our ports is involving us in more and more difficulty." Sophie glanced across at André in surprise. His voice was bitter, André who in the old

days would never have dreamed of criticising his beloved Emperor or even admitting that he could be wrong.

There was an uneasy silence and then M. de Couillet said, "The Prussians and Austrians would never dare to dispute our ascendancy, we have defeated them too many times in the past—Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena, Wagram."

"There is a new spirit of nationalism abroad these days. The Prussians are taking example from the Spanish guerillas, you have heard of von Lutzow's Nightriders? They attack French couriers who ride alone and isolated French outposts, on our long lines of communication with Russia, mark you. We gave these people the idea of liberty in the first instance, in the days of the Revolution, and now they are turning it against us. The Emperor cannot hold down the whole of Europe indefinitely. For twenty years we have been fighting, first to protect our frontiers against invasion, then to show the various coalitions of foreign powers that we meant to preserve our ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. But having shown them the new order and encouraged them to throw out their old oppressors we, in our turn, are forced to use oppressive measures and are every bit as tyrannical as their old rulers. We have lost sight of our original principles. The Emperor is overreaching himself, he is waging war for the sake of war and the country people and the bourgeoisie are sick of it all, they want to enjoy the fruits of victory, and who can blame them. How many families do you know who have lost one son, or even two, and now refuse to let another one go? They hide them out in barns and outhouses and feed them secretly to evade the call-up."

After rather a lengthy pause, M. de Couillet and Lucien nodded reflectively and the former said, "It is true, I know unofficially of many such cases. We owe the Emperor a great debt for his Code Civile and the new enterprises he has put in hand all over the country. France has never been so prosperous, but these constant wars are a drain on our prosperity and our manpower.

What would you have us do, General? You surely don't want the Bourbons back?"

André shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I am only a soldier, Monsieur, I obey orders. I have sworn allegiance to the Emperor and I shall probably be killed in his service, if they can patch me up enough to fight again."

Sophie caught her breath and looked at André unbelievably. He was completely changed, disillusioned and embittered, where once he had been full of enthusiasm and energy. She could hardly bear to look at him. The talk went on about her while she sat there silently, speculating on the alteration in his outlook. It was not the first time she had heard Lucien and his country neighbours grumbling about the Emperor, but the things André had said could be construed as treason almost, coming as they did from a much-decorated French General.

When dinner was over and they moved into the salon, Sophie was pressed to play for them by Stephanie. Sophie was reluctant to do anything which would call attention to herself, but repeated refusals would have caused unnecessary fuss so she sat down at the piano with Victor offering his services to turn over her music. After she had finished and been applauded handsomely, the young lieutenant helped her to shut up the piano and under cover of the buzz of talk Sophie said to him quietly, "Have you been with the General long, Monsieur?"

"Since the beginning of the year, Madame."

"Were you with him when he was wounded?"

"Yes, I was. It was at the Battle of Salamanca in July. His foot was taken off by a cannonball as he was riding along the lines, trying to rally the remnants of the cavalry. We were taken prisoner by the English, but exchanged after a few weeks for some of their own wounded. The English treated us very well and the Commander, Sir Arthur Wellesley, had his own surgeon attend the General."

"Will the General ever be able to return to duty, do you think?"

"Not for some time, although he is determined enough. He is already talking of riding again. Did you know the General before, Madame, did I hear him say?"

"Yes, we have met—in Germany. Tell me, Monsieur, is he married?"

"No, Madame. I sometimes think he would be happier if he were. The General is a difficult man, with an uncertain temper." The lieutenant clearly regretted this last sentence as soon as it was spoken. He reddened and amended it hastily. "But he has always been most considerate to his subordinates and I have had nothing but kindness from him myself."

Sophie looked over to where André was sitting on a sofa between Stephanie and the pretty Louise. While Stephanie questioned him about his experiences in Spain, the young girl, her eyes shining with hero-worship, listened to him intently, and André, obviously aware of her adoration, gave her a faint half-smile from time to time. Victor followed the direction of her eyes and laughed. "As you can see my sister has fallen head over heels in love with the General, she thinks him incredibly melancholy and romantic. You know what these young girls are like. Poor Louise, he has not given her much encouragement, I am afraid."

Sophie felt stifled with her emotions, her head ached and she longed for the evening to end. It seemed hours before Mme. de Couillet finally rose and gathered her family round her to say good-bye. "It has been such a delightful evening, dear Mme. de Briancourt. You must come over to us next week, on Thursday? You will come as well, Madame la Baronne, won't you and bring your music? I know the General is devoted to music and none of us can play as well as you."

Sophie murmured something polite and the visitors drifted slowly into the hall, matching their pace to André's, constantly recalling one more topic of conversation as they were helped on with their cloaks.

"Good-bye, Madame," André said distantly to Sophie, the only remark he had addressed directly to her the entire evening and Sophie, swallowing the lump in her throat, bowed her head and whispered, "Good-bye."

She ran upstairs to her room immediately the guests had gone without waiting for Lucien and Stephanie to come in from the front steps and threw herself on her bed in a painful outburst of pent-up tears. Stephanie, coming in half an hour later to discover her reactions, was surprised to find her still crying. She sat down on the bed and put her arm round Sophie.

"Sophie dearest, why are you crying? Aren't you happy to have seen your General again?"

Sophie, her eyes red and swollen, turned over and cried, "Stephanie, I can never forgive you for bringing us face to face tonight without warning."

Stephanie was astonished. "But, dearest, I thought that nothing would please you more. Haven't you always said that he was the only man you have ever loved?"

"So he is, but you saw how he behaved. He said one word to me, one word only, and that was 'Good-bye'. You couldn't have done anything which humiliated me more."

"Oh, Sophie, I am sorry, dearest. It did not turn out as I anticipated, I admit, I only wanted to bring you two together again. I thought you would both be delighted."

"Oh, poor André," Sophie burst out crying again. "What has happened to him? I could hardly bear to look at him, he has changed completely, quite apart from his poor foot."

"Sophie, don't you think he needs you as much as you need him? You are both unhappy apart."

"He can never forgive me for acting as a spy. It's no use, Stephanie. It was kind of you to try, but it's no use. If he is going to be with the de Couillels for long I had better leave here."

"Oh, what nonsense! Perhaps the shock of seeing you tonight so unexpectedly has thrown him off balance

temporarily. When we go to the de Couillets next week he will have had time to reflect. You will see, Sophie, he will behave quite differently next time."

"There won't be a next time," Sophie said, her voice muffled in a handkerchief. "I can't go."

"Not go! Sophie dear, be sensible. You will regret your pride bitterly, mark my words. We are all ready to help you to be reconciled."

"But he has no wish to see or speak to me again, he made that only too clear tonight."

"You are being stubborn. Just a little encouragement from you and he will forgive you for everything. After all, it was not your fault you were being coerced into spying for your brother-in-law, you were exonerated completely in the end."

"How little you understand André, his honour was in question."

"Men and their principles," Stephanie scoffed. "They lead to more unhappiness than their vices."

"I would not respect André as I do, if he had no principles."

"I won't argue with you any more tonight. Go to sleep now, dear Sophie, you are worn out. In the morning you will feel differently."

"No," Sophie said, shaking her head vigorously, "no. André said two years ago it was all over between us and he meant it."

"Men can say one thing and mean quite another. I saw him looking at you when you were playing tonight, Sophie, there was no mistaking the longing in his eyes."

"You also saw the look he gave me when we were introduced and you would have been frozen by the coldness of his farewell. You are deluding yourself, Stephanie, all his feelings for me are dead, quite dead."

"Oh, your stubborn pride," Stephanie said in an exasperated voice. "You should both of you have your heads banged together. Good night, Sophie."

If Stephanie expected a night's sleep to alter Sophie's resolution not to see André again, she was mistaken.

She completely refused to accompany them to the de Couillels the following week, in spite of Stephanie's protests, and told her to plead indisposition for her non-appearance at the dinner party. Stephanie saw André's eyes going beyond her when she and Lucien arrived alone and his sharp tremor of disappointment, hastily concealed, when no Sophie was to be seen behind them and she said to Lucien in an undertone, "I knew I was right. Sophie was mad not to come." Aloud she apologised to Mme. de Couillet for Sophie's absence, going into great detail about Sophie's delicate state of health, while she scanned André's face for any sign of interest. But after that first flicker of feeling André's features had returned to impassivity and he turned away to talk to Lucien, asking whether he had heard any news from Russia through his friends. Stephanie exchanged a shrewd look with Mme. de Couillet and shrugged her shoulders.

But after refusing to go to the de Couillels and speaking every day of her imminent departure, Sophie was visited by a curious indecision. On the one hand she knew she was foolish not to pack up and go immediately, there was no point in torturing herself with the sight of her lost love, and yet all the time she knew she would be able to catch a glimpse of him, even if they barely acknowledged one another's presence, she was reluctant to leave and miss such opportunities. She despised herself for this indecision and yet comforted herself with the thought that she was hurting no one by staying on, was even pleasing Stephanie, for each time she said half-heartedly, "I must go," Stephanie replied, "Don't go yet, dearest, there's no need. After all, you have as much right as he has to be here. In any case you have little or no contact with him, most of the time he is talking to Lucien."

Indeed André seemed to have taken a great liking to Lucien, driving over frequently to discuss current events or, if the weather was fine, going round his estate with him. With André, more often than not, came Victor, Louise and her younger sister. Louise was avid for even

five minutes spent in the company of the romantic and interesting General and Victor, as well as attending André, had conceived a great admiration for Sophie, which did not displease her for it gave her an opportunity to speak about André to him, a painful but fascinating subject. Victor, though not blind to André's faults, was very attached to him and was only too pleased to recount stories of his adventures as his A.D.C. to such a charming and attentive listener.

Stephanie was delighted to see the attentions Victor was paying to Sophie. "Don't you find Victor a charming boy?" she asked her slyly.

Sophie smiled. "He's just a charming boy, no more, no less, don't go building up your hopes."

Her friend made a smiling disclaimer. "Oh, I won't chérie, if you don't wish me to, but he seems very devoted to you."

Sophie, Stephanie and Lucien usually went out riding each fine morning and one day in early December as they were turning out of the park gates they came face to face with André and Victor and Louise de Couillet, also on horseback.

"We were riding over to inspect the Gaillard property which is for sale," André said to Stephanie and Lucien, when they had exchanged salutations. "Would you care to come with us? A woman's eyes in such matters is always helpful and I am sure Mlle. Louise would be glad of reinforcements." Louise giggled and made a little charming grimace. "And you, Monsieur, can advise me about the grounds which have been sadly neglected."

Before Sophie could demur, Stephanie and Lucien had agreed with enthusiasm and they turned their horses' heads in that direction. The Gaillard demesne was close to the de Briancourts' small estate. It was, as André had said, sadly neglected and run down. The owner had been imprisoned and guillotined during the Revolution and the property had been sequestered by the local authorities. They rode up a long drive, choked with weeds and overhanging trees in need of pruning, and dismounted

at the foot of the dilapidated stone steps leading to the entrance, desolate with broken pediments and cracked urns full of straggling branches.

André had looked so at ease on horseback, so like his old self, that Sophie had momentarily forgotten his disability and it was with a considerable shock that she watched him slide from his saddle and stand supporting himself awkwardly on one leg, until Victor produced his crutches and he could swing himself rapidly up the steps, cheerfully urging everyone to follow him. Victor drew out a large key which he had procured from the old caretaker at the gatehouse and they went into the circular, marble-tiled hall which, in spite of the dirt and cobwebs everywhere, gave an impression of grace and elegance.

"But this is delightful," cried Stephanie, looking round her, "quite delightful. Once you have cleared away the dirt and repainted the walls this will be beautiful. What have you got through here, General?" and she, André and Louise disappeared through one of the double mahogany doors into a long salon which faced on to the forlorn garden. Sophie, Lucien and Victor followed more slowly.

Stephanie was in her element, darting from room to room, exclaiming over their proportions and telling André exactly how he should furnish and decorate them. Louise, at his other side, was joining in too, even disagreeing with Stephanie over suggested colour schemes, with quite a little air of proprietorship.

"In all these years I have been in the army I have never had a place I could call my own and now I feel the need to anchor myself in some part of France," André was explaining to Stephanie.

"You really need a wife as well, General," Sophie heard her say and she turned away to gaze out of the window, thinking sadly that if André was really going to settle here it must mean an end to her stay with Stephanie. Was he seriously thinking of getting married and settling down? Would he marry Louise? She was so

young and pretty, with a short upper lip which never quite covered her little white pointed teeth and gave her a look of appealing eagerness. Sophie sighed deeply.

"Are you going to see the upstairs rooms, Madame la Baronne?" Victor asked in her ear and Sophie started slightly, brought back to reality. She could hear Louise's high childish voice raised in excitement and her little giggle of pleasure from somewhere halfway up the stairs. "I don't think so," she said, "I'll wait here till you come down. All this dust is making me sneeze, I think I'll go out on the terrace in the sunshine for a while."

"Shall I come with you?" Victor asked, wrestling with the long glass-paned doors which opened out from the room on to a stone terrace at the back of the house.

"No, I'm sure you want to be with the others. I'll be all right on my own for quarter of an hour or so."

The sun was quite warm on Sophie's back as she leant on the balustrade, which was covered with a tangle of unpruned roses. The birds were singing in the park beyond and she caught the glitter of water from a small lake hidden behind unkempt trees. If André bought the place he would have a great deal of work ahead of him. She supposed time would bring her resignation but she could not face with equanimity at the moment the thought of André married to someone else, someone like Louise, settling down to live here, to have children and to put down deep roots in the French countryside.

She was roused from her melancholy thoughts by Stephanie who came out on the terrace. "What are you doing here on your own, chérie? You really ought to have seen the rest of the house. It could be made really charming. I think the General has nearly made up his mind to buy it. I am delighted at the thought of having him as a near neighbour." She took Sophie's arm, urging her to rejoin the rest, and Sophie tried to smile at her cheerfully.

Both André's plans and the smooth rut of their peaceful country existence was disrupted when they received, in late December, the copy of *Le Moniteur* in which

was published the Emperor's stark 29th Bulletin, telling of the virtual annihilation of the great army which had invaded Russia in June.

"All the General's fears were right, then," said Lucien when he had read it aloud to his wife and Sophie. "What a terrible catastrophe!"

But it was not until the New Year when the triumphant Russia showed unmistakable signs of joining Prussia and England in a new coalition against France that the true danger became apparent. Lucien announced that he must return to Paris at once and he was busy supervising the packing of his things two days later when André and Victor arrived unexpectedly. As Stephanie was out and Lucien engaged, the manservant ushered them into the library where Sophie was occupied in sorting out and packing Lucien's books and papers.

"Good morning, Madame," André said formally and Sophie felt, to her chagrin, the colour rising in her cheeks.

"Did you wish to see M. and Mme. de Briancourt especially, Monsieur le General? I am afraid they are both unavailable. M. de Briancourt has decided to return to Paris unexpectedly and the whole household is upside down."

"I have decided to return to Paris myself and I have come to say good-bye."

"Oh!" was all Sophie could find to say.

"It is evident from the Emperor's latest message to the Senate that every general officer will be urgently needed."

"But," Sophie said quickly, "are you in a fit state to go? I should have thought—" and her eyes strayed to his crutches.

André was furious. "There is nothing wrong with my brain, is there? I can still serve the Emperor from behind a desk. There is no need to write me off completely because I have lost a foot in battle."

"I am sorry, I did not mean—" Sophie stammered. "I thought—" André stared at her angrily and she felt

tears coming to her eyes and blinked quickly to prevent them escaping.

"M. de Couillet, leave us alone, please," André said abruptly and Victor, rather surprised, backed out obediently and closed the doors softly behind him.

"Sophie, I cannot leave for Paris without speaking to you," André began in a hoarse voice after a long uncomfortable pause. "Sophie, I must ask your forgiveness for deserting you in Hamburg. I thought then I had no choice in the matter, but I have never ceased to reproach myself all these years. I thought only of my own position, which was cruel and selfish of me, and I am afraid you have suffered greatly because of this. You have shown very clearly that you have no wish to renew our association, but I can't leave without asking you to accept my apologies, hard though that may be for you."

Sophie was completely taken aback at his words. "But I have never reproached you for deserting me! What else could you do when the Marshal himself had ordered you to arrest me? I brought it all on my own head."

"You forgive me then?"

"But, of course."

André cleared his throat. "You are very magnanimous, Madame. I hope you will be happy in the future and that you will think kindly of me sometimes."

"But, André, why do you imagine that I have no wish to think of you frequently?"

"You received me so coldly and you have scarcely spoken a word to me since we encountered each other again and I realised how painful such encounters were for you. But all the time I knew you were here, a short drive away, I wished to see you even if I could not speak to you."

Sophie began to laugh with an undercurrent of tears. "Oh, André, how absurd you are being. How can you think this nonsense? It was your own attitude which made me so restrained. I thought it was you who had no wish to see or speak to me again."

"Sophie, my dearest, do you mean that you still love me?"

"Of course, André, of course, I have never ceased to love you."

André moved towards her and awkwardly, for his crutches were still under his arms, tried to embrace her. "Ten thousand curses on these things," he said, flinging them from him violently. He put his arms round her properly, balancing on one leg. "Sophie, my precious, I love you so much. I have been lost without you all these years, can you ever forgive me for deserting you? Will you come to Paris with me?"

"Oh, André, do you have to go? Haven't you done enough already? I thought from what you said the other night that you were sick of war?"

"I am sick of war, but my oath of allegiance to the Emperor is still binding on me and France herself is in danger now. I can't stand aside at this moment."

"I thought the loss of your foot would enable you to resign from the army with honour. What about your intention of buying the Gaillard estate and settling down in the country?"

"Sophie, my dearest, let us sit down where we can be more comfortable. Listen, Sophie, do you want to marry a man who has broken a solemn oath? I know I could leave the army and no one could accuse me of cowardice, but all the time I am capable of serving the Emperor I wish to do so. Can you understand?"

"Yes," Sophie said softly, turning to him with her big eyes glowing with pride and love, "it is one of the reasons why I love you. But what is this about marriage? I thought Mlle. de Couillet was your choice?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"She is very young and pretty and will probably have a large dowry," Sophie said teasingly. "What could be more suitable?"

The doors opened suddenly and André, thinking it was Victor, looked up in annoyance. It was Stephanie, however. "My dear General, I was told you were here."

She stopped short when she saw them sitting very close together, holding hands.

"My dears," she said with emotion. "Then all is well at long last?"

"We hope so," said André, "we very much hope so."



An enchanting innocent despite
her mother's amorous indiscretions,
Sophie Monteval

was raised in Parisian elegance. But when that bewitching beauty, Sophie's mother, indulged in indiscreet spying, her frivolous life ended violently. And lovely young Sophie was married off to a boorish East Prussian Baron—isolated and miserable with a man she hated, far from friends and the Paris she adored.

Then the strange twists of Napoleon's war brought a reckless French soldier into Sophie's life. Could he rescue her from the brutish Baron, or was it too late to grasp at life and newfound love?

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